



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Consuming War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*

Kate M. Nash

Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, Volume 2, Number 1, Winter 2014, pp. 39-47 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/583707>

# Consuming War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*

KATE M. NASH

Comprised of one part rationed butter, one part donated currants, and one part real eggs, the cake that Arthur Rowe accidentally wins at his local fair proves to be anything but the delectable dessert that he initially perceives it to be. Instead, the final, secret ingredient inserted into that cake is a roll of microfilm containing photographed documents from England's Ministry of Home Security. Rowe's attempts to keep this microfilm out of the hands of the fifth columnists and Nazi spies chasing after it provide the action of Graham Greene's 1943 novel *The Ministry of Fear*. The historical backdrop for Greene's self-proclaimed "entertainment" is a London that has been remade by the blitz of the Second World War. And indeed, one aspect of London life that is depicted as having been remade is the culinary sphere. While on one level the novel reflects the harsh historical realities of wartime food rationing and austerity on the home front, it also imagines a London in which food and kitchen spaces have been completely reappropriated, refashioned, and repurposed to serve as vehicles of war: cakes hide and transport microfilm, milk and tea contain poison, and kitchens serve as darkrooms for the enemy. These repurposed foods and food spaces both propel the narrative and depict the logic of contemporary wartime food propaganda; Greene positions nonrationed food and disordered food spaces as very real weapons that have the possibility to undermine the war effort from within. Although the intended effect of the logic of such food

propaganda may have been to create stability and a gendered order in the wake of war, Greene's novel reveals how that very same propaganda inadvertently calls reproduced narratives of identity, and of masculinity specifically, into question.

Much of the recent scholarship on Greene's novel focuses on its relationship to the Second World War and the blitz. For Damon DeCoste, the memory loss that is at the center of Greene's narrative mirrors the "twentieth century's own genocidal reenactment of the historical nightmare" of war.<sup>1</sup> And it is the uncanny effects of war in Greene's novel that Victoria Stewart and Petra Rau explore, with Stewart analyzing the impact of bombardment on the senses and Rau revealing how "war undoes the self" by eroding boundaries "between otherwise distinct categories of the strange and the familiar, the past and the present, the other and the self, the enemy and the ally."<sup>2</sup> In her analysis of the relationship between Greene's novel and the thriller genre, Kristine Miller similarly asserts that "the blitz made it impossible . . . to sustain . . . boundaries; placing soldiers and civilians alike in the line of fire, the bombing effectively collapsed distinctions between masculine and feminine spaces and roles."<sup>3</sup> Despite this productive inquiry, there has been little to no sustained attention to the way in which Greene's novel positions repurposed wartime food and food spaces, specifically, as the alimentary objects and moments that thrust Rowe into the world of espionage and that keep him there.

Modernity, as Roland Barthes has argued, can be characterized by a "polysemia of food."<sup>4</sup> And it is this polysemia that critics of modernism, such as Diane McGee, Lawrence Rainey, and Sarah Sceats, have each explored, with a focus on consumption, desire, hunger, starvation, and asceticism.<sup>5</sup> In times of world war and rationing, the polysemia of food necessarily shifts, opening up even further. Through her focus on tropes of hunger, for example, Maud Ellmann shows how gluttony in women was particularly abhorred during the First World War. Overweight women were understood as depriving the Allies of rations and as such "became scapegoats for the guilt America was suffering about its late and grudging entry into the War."<sup>6</sup> Other critics, such as Allison Caruth, explore the relationship between food, late modernism, and the Second World War, asserting that in "treating food aesthetically, modernist writers neither resist the culture of consumption nor disavow the 'social life of things' . . . but squarely confront the global market in the

practices and ideologies that fuel the food economy.”<sup>7</sup> Although critics continue to study food in both high modernist and late modernist contexts, what deserves further analysis is food within intermodernism, the critical category of which Greene’s novel is a part. As Kristen Bluemel asserts, intermodernist texts, which include the neglected writing of the Depression and the Second World War, are marked by working-class and working middle-class issues, political engagement, and a commitment to noncanonical and mass genres.<sup>8</sup> As such, they are especially concerned with work, community, war, and political documents. Greene’s “entertainment,” which is at once genre fiction and a political novel exploring the Second World War on the home front, fits squarely into this category. Because the radical changes in food culture during the Second World War—food rationing and food propaganda in particular—are imbricated in questions of class, politics, and war, food studies emerges as a necessary lens both for engaging with Greene’s novel and for exploring intermodernist writing more broadly.

Greene’s depiction of food rationing reflects the historical reality of the period. Although in the opening of the novel Rowe is drawn to the fête by the sound of balls knocking on coconuts, the very second line undercuts such merriment. The narrator interjects, “Of course this year there were no coconuts because there was a war on.”<sup>9</sup> There are also no cakes; when a waitress watches Rowe leave an ABC restaurant, she does so “through the window from between the empty cake-stands.”<sup>10</sup> This alimentary lack is due to the food rationing that began in January 1940 in response to the outbreak of war. By that spring, “all meat was rationed by price, followed in the summer by margarine and tea; over the following year cheese, eggs, rice and dried fruit, tinned tomatoes and peas, sweets and chocolate, biscuits, flour, jams, treacle and most other canned foods would follow.”<sup>11</sup> To enforce rationing and to ensure equity, the process for procuring food also systematically changed: families were forced to wait in line with their ration books and coupons to receive their government-dictated portions. Because many traditional foods were limited, substitute foods were often used, such as dried eggs in place of real eggs, carrots in place of sugar and other sweeteners, and utility cheese in place of real cheese; likewise the processed foods Spam, Marmite, and Bovril gained in both popularity and necessity.

England’s Ministry of Food was responsible for instituting and dictating these food policies through propaganda campaigns, which

greatly expanded the role of the state into people's daily lives. As Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska argues, food policies became "the principal means by which the government facilitated the dramatic reduction of civilian consumption and reallocation of resources for mobilization in a total war."<sup>12</sup> Because women were those most likely to be procuring and cooking food, the Ministry of Food deployed targeted propaganda to ensure their complicity with rationing. In wartime food propaganda campaigns, as Amy Bentley notes, "the family dinner became a weapon of war, and the kitchen a woman's battlefield."<sup>13</sup> These poster, pamphlet, and radio campaigns "instilled . . . the national importance of thrift and the patriotism of survival," as cooks became kitchen warriors "to the beat of poster slogans warning 'Food wasted is another ship lost,' 'Waste the food and help the hun!', and 'A sailor's blood is on your head if you waste a scrap of bread!'"<sup>14</sup> Through this rhetorical refashioning of female cooks into warriors and through government intervention into the procurement, portion size, and materiality of food, the culinary realm was literally and figuratively reframed, rebranded as the "kitchen front." Within this food propaganda, it was the wasting of food that would cause the war to be lost.

The cake that Rowe mistakenly wins at the fair that opens the novel is an anomaly in a time of such alimentary austerity. As Rowe debates whether or not to try his luck and guess the weight of the cake, he acknowledges, "Cake, good cake, was scarce nowadays."<sup>15</sup> The cake's very goodness is based on its perceived authenticity. Those at the fair urge that it has been made with *real* eggs, a description that Rowe later repeats when sharing the dessert with Mrs. Purivs in his flat. While the cake is a decadent foodstuff, Greene also notes that it has been created with clubbed butter rations and donated currants. Its very materiality, then, undercuts the equity purported by rationing and demanded by propaganda. Not only does the cake not adhere to the strictures of government rationing, but it also holds something political at its very core: a roll of microfilm containing photographed British government documents that fifth columnists are attempting to transport. The cake is at once an edible foodstuff and a container of reproducible photographs that have the ability to undermine the government. This marrying of food and reproducible image is itself symbolic of wartime food propaganda. Unlike the propaganda directed at housewives, however, this cake turned film container has been created and is being transported

by both women and men. The fair is held on the behalf of the “Mothers of the Free Nations,” and a man named Poole is the intended recipient. Through this cake, Greene follows the logic of food propaganda: when food is not rationed and a gendered order not followed, it has the very real potential to defeat the government from within.

It is this food propaganda narrative into which Rowe is immediately and unwittingly thrust after he wins the cake. When Poole, the intended recipient, learns that Rowe has mistakenly won the cake, he goes to Rowe’s home and poisons his tea in an attempt to retrieve it. After taking a sip, however, Rowe recognizes that the tea has a strange taste. Before Rowe can confront Poole about the attempted poisoning, his flat is bombed, the cake is destroyed, and Poole gets away. Rowe’s subsequent affirmation to the private investigator Mr. Rennit that he “wouldn’t have thought twice about” Poole and the cake “if it hadn’t been for the taste the tea had” underscores that Rowe’s decision to embark on this spy caper is initiated by and then solidified through contact with repurposed food and food propaganda narratives.<sup>16</sup>

While nonrationed, decadent cakes undermine the government, the very spaces of their creation—disordered kitchens—do as well. Soon after the first bombing, Rowe teams up with brother and sister Willi and Anna Hilfe to find out who attempted to poison him. However, a second bomb hits, and Rowe loses his memory and finds himself in a “home” for shell-shocked victims. Despite this memory loss, Rowe soon grows suspicious of the purpose of the “home” and of one worker in particular, who turns out to be none other than the fifth columnist Poole. Venturing into the “sick bay,” Rowe comes across Poole’s living quarters: a kitchen turned bedroom space. Rowe immediately decides that Poole’s comfortless room has been branded by “an aggressive and squalid masculinity” and that nothing is used “for its right purpose.”<sup>17</sup> Because that room was at one time a kitchen, the proper purpose would be to prepare rationed food in wartime. Instead, the room is divided by a curtain, with one half of the space serving as living quarters and one half serving as sleeping quarters. While the space itself is misused, the objects in the room likewise do not serve their traditional purpose. A clock and a teapot act as bookends, a sponge bag hangs from a bedpost, and “a used tin which once held lobster paste now [holds] old razor-blades.”<sup>18</sup> The smell of caporal lingers in the air, and Poole’s bed is littered with crumbs, “as though [he] took food to bed with him.”<sup>19</sup> Poole,

it seems, does not even eat in the “right” place. These crumbs complement the cigarette ends that line the floor, the unmade bed, the dripping tap, and the suitcase bursting with soiled underclothes. This kitchen turned bedroom space, it is later revealed, is where the negatives of photographs of British government documents, those that have been smuggled in the cake and elsewhere, are being developed for the enemy.

Through the decadent cake and the disordered kitchen, Greene depicts the causal narrative of contemporary food propaganda: not rationing food, wasting food, and using kitchens improperly quite literally facilitate espionage. By depicting the logical, albeit exaggerated, end of such food propaganda in the novel, Greene calls attention to its status as a narrative. And it is that narrative, as the novel progresses, that prompts Rowe’s reconsideration of other narratives of identity, namely narratives of masculinity. Before Rowe accidentally wins the cake and is poisoned by Poole, for example, he is man who exists completely outside the war effort. Having spent time in an asylum after being convicted of the mercy killing of his wife, Rowe is deemed unfit “for Post Four or Post Two or Post any number.”<sup>20</sup> He recedes from the war, reading and memorizing *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield* because “they carried no adult memories.”<sup>21</sup> The adult memories that Rowe wants to escape and forget, of course, are those that pertain to his role in the euthanasia of his wife. Winning the cake turned film container, tasting the poisoned tea, and experiencing the squalid kitchen turned bedroom, however, thrust Rowe back into the war. They force him to confront not only the memory of his wife’s death but also narratives of masculinity.

One possible masculine narrative that emerges for Rowe through contact with the food propaganda narrative is that of Poole himself. Poole’s description as “dark and dwarfish and twisted in his enormous shoulders with infantile paralysis,” as Kristine Miller argues, aligns him with the conventional villain of the Edwardian thriller.<sup>22</sup> Poole may be a villain, but he is also revealed to be a kind of photographic negative or inversion of Rowe. Both Poole and Rowe, for separate reasons, are men who have been shut out of the war. Rowe’s killing of his wife takes him out of the war effort, and Poole’s disability prevents him from serving. While Poole’s political allegiances are with Germany, he insists on his similarity to Rowe in their initial meeting. The two, in Poole’s vision, are both “intelligent men” who want peace, who are not “one of the sheep.”<sup>23</sup> Intellectuals such as themselves, Poole continues, are the only

“free men” who are not “bound by conventions, patriotic emotions, sentimentality,” because they do not have “a stake in the country.”<sup>24</sup> In a strange repetition, Poole attempts to poison Rowe in the very same fashion in which Rowe ended his wife’s life. After Rowe sips his tea, “an odd flavor haunted him like something remembered, something unhappy.”<sup>25</sup> What Rowe tastes in his tea is poison—hyoscine, in fact, the very same poison that he had once mixed into a glass of milk in order to end the life of his terminally ill wife. The similarities between the two men also extend to Poole’s room, which is in some ways a redoubling of Rowe’s space. When Rowe is in Poole’s room, for example, he is “saddened by a sense of familiarity” and wonders if this is “real adult life.”<sup>26</sup> This familiarity and sense of adult life recalls the way in which Rowe was previously described as being “like a man camping in a desert” in his own living quarters.<sup>27</sup> Poole’s room is much more disordered than Rowe’s, but it too is “as comfortless as a transit camp.”<sup>28</sup> Although Rowe ultimately turns away from Poole’s aggressive and squalid masculinity, that narrative nevertheless stands as an option for him.

An alternative, and complementary, masculine narrative that opens up to Rowe is that of the adventurous hero. After Rowe discovers Poole’s kitchen turned living space, he confronts Dr. Forester and finally seeks the help of the police. Despite having lost all his adult memories, Rowe can nevertheless still recall the “odd taste” and the cake “made with real eggs” when he meets with authorities.<sup>29</sup> These crumbs of memory, so to speak, are what keep Rowe invested in the caper. When Detective Prentice and Rowe later return to the “home” to try to find the microfilm, Rowe is described as being reinvigorated by a boyhood fervor informed by the stories of his youth, feeling “happily drunk with danger and action.”<sup>30</sup> He envisions himself as playing part in a struggle against the enemies of his love interest, Anna Hilfe. He does not worry about the potential outcome of the chase because “none of the books of adventure [he] read as a boy had an unhappy ending.”<sup>31</sup> Quite soon, though, Rowe recognizes the fiction inherent to the narrative of the adventurous male hero. On the trip back to the “home,” for example, Rowe and Detective Prentice are described as being on a “violent superficial chase” and as experiencing a “cardboard adventure hurtling at seventy miles an hour along the edge of the profound natural occurrences of men.”<sup>32</sup> Then, when Rowe is confronted with the dead body of his friend Stone, he quickly learns that “adventure didn’t always follow the literary pattern,

that there weren't always happy endings."<sup>33</sup> The narrator notes that although these thrillers may provide the "heroic back-cloth to [Rowe's] personal adventure," they ultimately have "no more reality than the photographs in a propaganda album."<sup>34</sup> Here, propaganda narratives and narratives of the thriller genre are explicitly linked. Both are fictional narratives of identity; in the novel it is an engagement with one—food propaganda—that reveals the falseness of the other.

The final section of Greene's novel is titled "The Whole Man," which is ironic given the way in which the protagonist emerges as "Arthur Rowe with a difference."<sup>35</sup> This "difference," which has come about due to Rowe's contact with wartime food propaganda narratives, is an awareness of the fictional nature of other reproduced, manufactured, and political narratives of masculinity. These exaggerated narratives of wartime food propaganda, while deployed to create a gendered order in wartime, have the effect of drawing attention to themselves as political fictions; in so doing, they inadvertently call other narratives of identity into question. One potential effect of "tasting modernism" and consuming food propaganda, then, as Greene's novel suggests, is just this destabilizing of seemingly rigid narratives of identity.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Kate Nash** is a PhD candidate in English at Fordham University. Her dissertation "Food, Cooking, and Waste in Wartime Modernism" explores depictions of the alimentary changes caused by the Second World War on England's home front.

#### NOTES

1. Damon DeCoste, "Modernism's Shell-Shocked History: Amnesia, Repetition, and the War in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 4 (1999): 442.

2. Petra Rau, "The Common Ground: Fictions of Alterity in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* and Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*," *Literature and History* 14, no. 1 (2005): 32. See also Victoria Stewart, "The Auditory Uncanny in Wartime London: Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*," *Textual Practice* 18, no. 1 (2004): 65–81.

3. Kristine Miller, "'The World Has Been Remade': Gender, Genre, and the Blitz in Graham Greene's *The Ministry of Fear*," *Genre* 36 (2003): 137.

4. Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Food Consumption," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 32.

5. See, for example, Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Law-

rence Rainey, "Eliot among the Typists: Writing *The Waste Land*," *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005): 27–84; and Sarah Sceats, *Food, Consumption and the Body in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

6. Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 8–9.

7. Allison Carruth, "War Rationing and the Food Politics of Late Modernism," *Modernism/modernity* 16, no. 4 (2009): 768. See also Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8. For more on the critical category of intermodernism, see Kristen Bluemel, *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

9. Graham Greene, *The Ministry of Fear* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 3.

10. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 59.

11. Kate Colquhoun, *Taste: The Story of Britain through Its Cooking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 338.

12. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939–1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 256.

13. Amy Bentley, *Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 5.

14. Colquhoun, *Taste*, 339. Food is always political, but it became overtly so through such visual propaganda and the strange causality that it portended.

15. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 8.

16. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 24.

17. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 123.

18. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 123.

19. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 123.

20. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 64.

21. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 12.

22. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 14. See also Miller, "The World Has Been Remade."

23. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 16, 17.

24. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 18–19.

25. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 19.

26. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 123.

27. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 12.

28. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 123.

29. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 139.

30. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 159.

31. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 159.

32. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 161.

33. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 163.

34. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 159.

35. Greene, *The Ministry of Fear*, 132.