

One British Thing: A Bottle of Welfare Orange Juice, c. 1961–1971

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Abstract This essay inaugurates a new series in the *Journal of British Studies* titled “One British Thing.” This short essay uses a bottle of welfare orange juice distributed sometime between 1961 and 1971 to tell a larger story about the relationship between Britain’s Welfare State and the colonization and decolonization of the British West Indies. The history of the Welfare State has largely been told as a metropolitan story severed from a wider global history of empire. The empty bottle of concentrated orange juice, however, tells a different story. It exposes Britain’s own dependency on its colonial subjects to provide the means of furnishing welfare benefits to its metropolitan citizens. The history of welfare orange juice thus opens up a richer understanding of the politics and economics of the Welfare State and its relationship to colonial development projects on the one hand and the slow processes of decolonization on the other.

This bottle at one time contained sweetened concentrated orange juice derived from nine fresh oranges and containing sixty milligrams of Vitamin C per fluid ounce (figure 1). It was issued by the British government’s Welfare Foods Service to expectant mothers and to children between one month and five years old. This bottle dates between 1961, the year the label was redesigned, and 1971, when the program was terminated. It is sixteen centimeters tall and held six fluid ounces of juice. It would have lasted ten days if the recipient took the full dose, which ranged from three drops for infants of one month old to an imperial tablespoon for expectant mothers and older children. The label on the bottle’s back instructs that the product, which was to be stored in a cool place away from strong light, should be diluted with one part juice to six parts cold water, boiled, and then cooled if for infants. Although the juice was already sweetened, the label also suggests that adding additional sugar might be necessary, implying that the juice may not have been particularly palatable to young children.

Earlier bottles of the juice issued during World War II had clearly indicated that the product had been obtained from the United States under Lend-Lease.¹ What the label of this later bottle fails to mention, however, is that much of the juice within it derived from oranges grown and processed in the British West Indies. The history of welfare orange juice thus opens up a much more complex understanding of the relationship between two major themes in modern British history that have to

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¹ The National Archives, UK (hereafter TNA), MH 56/413, sample welfare orange juice label.



Figure 1—A used bottle of welfare orange juice, c. 1961–71, author’s collection.

date been treated separately: the politics and economics of the Welfare State, and those of colonial development and then decolonization.²

In 1942, in the midst of World War II, Britain’s Ministry of Food announced the Welfare Foods Service. The new program was to provide free or subsidized cod liver oil, fruit juices, and milk to all children under the age of five, as well as to pregnant mothers, regardless of income. The products were a means of supplying vitamins to the most vulnerable British citizens at a time when food shortages and controls could potentially compromise nutrition.³ During the war, concentrated orange juice was imported from the United States under Lend-Lease, but after the war, US dollars

² An exception to this rule is Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley, 2012).

³ Magnus Pyke, *Food and Society* (London, 1968), 7.

were scarce; the Treasury was reluctant to continue to expend them on American juice.⁴ This left the newly elected Labour government in a bind. It had ushered in the Welfare State that provided British citizens with a range of social services and had campaigned on the continuation of the Welfare Foods Service as part of this program.⁵

This ongoing commitment to the provision of welfare orange juice, a product that, unlike milk and cod liver oil, could not be manufactured in sun-starved Britain, led the government to jump-start an orange-growing industry and juice-concentrating plants in the British West Indies. The Ministry of Food encouraged Jamaica and British Honduras to plant orange trees and invest in specialized processing equipment by offering these colonies a guarantee that the Welfare Foods Service would purchase 75 percent of their concentrated orange juice output for ten years.⁶ While the plan to procure concentrated orange juice from colonial territories had been initiated by the demands of the Welfare Foods Service, the contract was framed by the rhetoric of “colonial development” and “agricultural diversification.” This discourse was widespread in the postwar period, and its use frequently downplayed Britain’s dependency on its colonies for consumer products.⁷

The Conservative Party win in the 1951 election initiated a slow and steady decline in government support for both the Welfare Foods Service and the long-term contract with West Indian suppliers. In the 1950s, the British government withdrew from supplying the juice to children over the age of two years and began to push for the cancellation of the ten-year contract, claiming that it had “doubtless been conceived in a spirit of helpfulness towards the Colonies” but was economically “bad” for both parties as it interfered with the free market.⁸ The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which now wanted to supply less juice, decried the Colonial Office’s attempt to “use the Welfare Foods Service as a means of assisting citrus producers.”⁹ The secretary of state for the colonies agreed that the West Indies should turn to the free market rather than remaining “largely dependent for its outlet on Government schemes of this nature.”¹⁰ That statement of course turned the rhetoric of dependency on its head, for in fact it was the British government that had initially been dependent on its Caribbean colonies for the supply of this product and incentivized them to produce it, knowing full well there was no world market for liquid concentrated orange juice, which had little commercial value.

In 1961, once the ten-year contract had ended, Harold Macmillan’s government removed the subsidy on welfare orange juice for all except those who qualified based on limited income, claiming that most British citizens did not require this form of financial assistance. The price more than tripled, and sales plummeted

⁴ TNA, T 227/1173, memorandum, 28 April, 1948.

⁵ TNA, MAF 99/1736, “Let Us Face the Future: A Declaration of Labour Policy for the Consideration of the Nation.”

⁶ TNA, MH 110/18, Long Term Contract with the West Indies for Supplies of Concentrated Orange Juice.

⁷ TNA, MAF 83/2310, Colonial Primary Products Committee Interim Report; TNA, MH 110/12, John Roberts, Welfare Foods Procurement Branch, to R. L. M. Kirkwood, 9 August 1955.

⁸ TNA, MH 110/12, note of a meeting held in Mr. Harwood’s room at 10, Whitehall Place, on 29 September 1955.

⁹ TNA, MAF 255/910, minute from G. S. Bishop, 15 July 1959 to secretary, Welfare orange juice from British West Indies (policy).

¹⁰ TNA, MH 110/12, minute from A. Lennox-Boyd to Manley and Gomes, 29 September 1955.

from 21.48 million bottles a year to 8.82 million, even though the three-to-five-year-olds removed from the scheme in the 1950s were now added back in.¹¹ The drop in consumption in turn led to a reduction in the amount of the product procured by the British government, which was no longer bound to purchase a specified amount of West Indian juice.

The declining sales could not have come at a more contentious political moment in colonial relations, as Jamaica declared its independence in August 1962 and simultaneously asked the British government to buy more juice to stabilize a citrus industry started entirely in service of the Welfare State. The Colonial Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office were concerned that the process of decolonization should go smoothly; they encouraged the purchase of more juice, despite the fact that this was a purely “political” move and hinged on “being nice to the Jamaicans in the early months of their independence.”¹²

Even if construed in these terms, the issue was not merely about being “nice” to a newly independent and “underdeveloped” Jamaica. It was also part of wider concerns about the balance of power in a Cold War world. The minister of state for the Commonwealth Relations Office stressed “how desirable it would be for us to have a country, the majority of whose people are of Afro-Asian descent” and thus non-aligned, “supporting Britain in international disputes.” He cautioned the Ministry of Health that, in an increasingly polarized world, “I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that if we cannot meet the Jamaicans over concentrated orange juice we will be in danger of losing the friendship of the Jamaican Government.”¹³ Indeed the Jamaican prime minister insisted that the British government should not leave the orange growers—who had planted these trees with the expectation of decades of profit—“in the lurch” and threatened to sell Jamaican concentrated orange juice to Cuba and to Russia.¹⁴

But at the moment of decolonization, the British government did leave the West Indians high and dry. Britain bought only the minimal amount of juice needed for a Welfare Foods Service that had been severely gutted. By 1971 the government had withdrawn the bottles of welfare orange juice entirely, replacing them with synthetic vitamin drops and tablets and thus relegating this “thing” to an artifact of history.

The history of Britain’s Welfare State has largely been told as a metropolitan story severed from a wider global history of empire. This empty bottle that once held concentrated orange juice, however, tells a different story. It exposes Britain’s dependency on its colonial subjects to provide the means of furnishing welfare benefits to its metropolitan citizens. The history of welfare orange juice thus opens up a richer understanding of the politics and economics of the Welfare State and its relationship to colonial development projects on the one hand and the slow processes of decolonization on the other.

¹¹ TNA MH 156/94, “Uptake of Welfare Foods-Quantities.”

¹² TNA, DO 200/25, E. L. Sykes, Commonwealth Relations Office, to C. E. Diggines, Kingston, Jamaica, 14 September 1942.

¹³ TNA, DO 200/25, draft letter from Duke of Devonshire to minister of health.

¹⁴ TNA DO 200/26, telegram from Kingston, Jamaica, to Commonwealth Relations Office, 28 September 1962; C. E. Diggines, Kingston, Jamaica, to E. L. Sykes, Commonwealth Relations Office, 22 October, 1962; R. M. K. Slater, Foreign Office, to E. L. Sykes, 22 October 1962; C. E. Diggines, British High Commission, Jamaica to E. L. Sykes, 2 November 1962.