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ARTÍCULOS / ARTICLES

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## MEDIA REPORTING OF LABOUR SHORTAGES IN UK HORTICULTURE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE USE OF WARTIME METAPHORS IN THE SELECTIVE UNVEILING OF PRECARIOUS WORK/WORKERS

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**Abstract:** Over the 21<sup>st</sup> century almost all of the UK's harvest labour has been foreign-born. The COVID-19 crisis (from March 2020) threatened UK food security by limiting this supply of low-wage foreign labour into the UK. In response a national campaign was launched to get a domestic 'Land Army' to 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain' (the three main epithets used). The article profiles this campaign. We show that the COVID-19 crisis put low-wage harvest labour into the spotlight when this labour is usually hidden from public view. Potentially, such unveiling could have challenged the economics of the food production system. However, we argue that the rupture was stage-managed by invoking a wartime rhetoric and three key concomitant roles of the victim-hero farmer, the good migrant, and the reluctant British-based understudy. These emphasised the valiant nature of harvest work and framed migrant workers as (temporary) heroes helping to save the nation. In contrast, British-based workers' reluctance to embrace precarious work was framed as personal deficiency rather than a structural failure to create decent jobs. In all, the spotlight cast on the low-wage rural economy by the COVID-19 crisis was carefully targeted and stage-managed and did not challenge the persistence of precarious horticultural work.

**Key words:** Agriculture, COVID-19, Food, Horticulture, Labour, Media, Migration, Shortages.

### LA INFORMACIÓN DE LOS MEDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN SOBRE LA ESCASEZ DE MANO DE OBRA EN LA HORTICULTURA DEL REINO UNIDO DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19: EL USO DE METÁFORAS BÉLICAS EN LA REVELACIÓN SELECTIVA DE LA PRECARIEDAD LABORAL/DE LOS TRABAJADORES

**Resumen:** A lo largo del siglo XXI, casi toda la mano de obra de las cosechas del Reino Unido ha sido de origen extranjero. La crisis de la COVID-19 (a partir de marzo de 2020) amenazó la seguridad alimentaria del Reino Unido al limitar este suministro de mano de obra extranjera con bajos salarios en el Reino Unido. En respuesta, se lanzó una campaña nacional para conseguir un "ejército de tierra" nacional que "alimentara a la nación" y "recogiera para Gran Bretaña" (los tres principales epítetos utilizados). El artículo describe esta campaña. Se muestra que la crisis del COVID-19 puso en el punto de mira la mano de obra de las cosechas con bajos salarios, cuando esta mano de obra suele estar oculta a la vista del público. Potencialmente, esta revelación podría haber cuestionado la economía del sistema de producción de alimentos. Sin embargo, sostenemos que la ruptura se escenificó invocando una retórica bélica y tres papeles clave concomitantes: el agricultor víctima-héroe, el buen emigrante y el suplente reactivo de origen británico. Esto enfatiza la naturaleza valiente del trabajo de la cosecha y enmarca a los trabajadores inmigrantes como héroes (temporales) que ayudan a salvar la nación. Por el contrario, la reticencia de los trabajadores británicos a aceptar el trabajo precario se presentaba como una deficiencia personal y no como un fracaso estructural en la creación de empleos decentes. En definitiva, la crisis de la COVID-19 puso el foco de atención en la economía rural de bajos salarios y fue cuidadosamente dirigida y gestionada, sin cuestionar la persistencia del trabajo hortícola precario.

**Palabras clave:** Agricultura, COVID-19, Alimentación, Horticultura, Trabajo, Medios de comunicación, Migración, Escasez.

## INTRODUCTION

Up to 70,000 workers are needed each year in the UK to bring in the harvest (EFRA, 2020, p. 21). The COVID-19 crisis, which spread throughout Europe from March 2020, constituted a significant threat to the supply of this harvest labour, most of which at the time came from abroad.<sup>1</sup> There was concern that food would be left to rot in the fields due to temporary migrant workers not being available. As a consequence, a nationwide campaign was launched called 'Feed the Nation' (later rebranded as 'Pick for Britain') that focused on mobilising a UK 'Land Army' to get the 2020 harvest in. It is worth noting, the concern over labour shortages and 'crops rotting' predates COVID-19 and has been observed in many horticultural sectors, especially in higher-income countries. Indeed, some have now become sceptical with respect to the frequency with which employers' claim they face low-wage labour shortages (Campbell, 2019). What was novel about the COVID-19 pandemic was not that 'crops could rot', but that this fear triggered campaigns to get British-based labour back into the fields.

The article focuses on how the prospect of harvest labour shortages, and the associated campaigns to get local workers into the fields, were reported in the UK newspaper media (local, regional and national) at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (in the six-months from March 2020 (01/03/20) to September 2020 (01/09/20)). Specifically, we argue that the campaigns, and the media reporting of them, invoked a wartime narrative that cast migrant workers as (temporary) heroes saving the nation in difficult times, when what could have been achieved was an exposure of the precarious nature of harvest work.

We first locate our argument in the context of the increasing reliance on low-wage immigration in horticulture, and anti-immigrant sentiment in the UK. We then look at the hidden nature of precarious harvest work through the lenses of 'commodity fetishism' and the 'rural idyll'. We examine literature on media coverage of harvest labour. We outline the steps involved in our analysis of the media representations and discuss media coverage and ownership in the UK. The findings section first describes the timeline of the reporting of the 'Land Army' campaign and then charts the chronology and tropes associated with media interest in the fears around the pandemic and crops rotting. We note the heroic emphasis associated with metaphors of war and draw attention to three key roles within this – the victim-hero farmer, the good migrant, and the reluctant British understudy – each of which served

to draw attention to agents' potential responses to perceived crises, rather than locate the problem in the context of broader, neoliberal, political-economic structures. We finally look back-stage at points when the veil over harvest work had the potential to be lifted. In conclusion, we note how, despite the potential exposure of the hidden world of precarious harvest work brought about by the COVID-19 crisis, media representations served to legitimate a political-economic status-quo and precarious farm work/ workers remained largely hidden from public view.

## INVISIBLE HARVEST LABOUR

Hoggart and Mendoza's (1999) seminal article on African immigrant workers in Spanish agriculture marks the beginning, in Europe at least, of an academic interest in the relationship between labour market segmentation (Doeringer and Piore, 1971; Piore, 1979) and harvest migration. This interest is now very well developed (Corrado et al., 2017; Gertel and Sippel, 2014; Rye and O'Reilly, 2021; Rye and Scott, 2018) and it is clear that horticultural employers' demand for precarious (i.e. low-paid and insecure) workers has underpinned considerable international labour migration to rural areas. The horticultural industry, across core economies, appears to have become hooked on the 'spatial fix' (Scott, 2013a) of low-wage immigration, to the extent that is now very rare for local labour to be harvesting crops.

We have reached the point that it is now difficult to envisage how farmers could harvest their crops without mass labour migration, and this is underpinned by farmers emphasizing the qualities and associated superior work ethic of specific migrant groups (McAravey, 2017; Scott, 2013b; Scott and Rye, 2021; Shubin et al., 2014). This demand for migrant workers, of the 'right' quantity and quality, has emerged against a backdrop of considerable workplace intensification (Rogaly, 2008).

However, alongside the growing dependence of UK horticulture on low-wage immigration, we have seen anti-immigrant sentiment grow, especially as manifested in the vote for Brexit (in June 2016), and regularly supported by mass media reporting of immigration (Morrison, 2019).

As Milbourne and Coulson (2021) note, precarious harvest labour is very much hidden within the rural landscapes of higher income economies (see also Lever and Milbourne, 2017). Despite many academic studies drawing attention to it, precarious labour, har-

vest work in particular, remains poorly represented in the public realm. Put simply, there is a tendency not to want to unveil the exploitative labour practices that have underpinned an era of relatively cheap and convenient food. Further, harvest workers often lead “quarantined” lives whilst on the farm (Horgan and Linnamaa, 2017; Scott and Visser, 2022) and tend to have little contact with permanent local residents.

It is useful to view this invisibility, in the UK context, through the conceptual lenses of commodity fetishism and the rural idyl. Through what Marx termed the ‘fetishism of commodities’ value is made to inhere in the product rather than in the labour that goes into its production and complex and unequal social relations underpinning the distribution of work and reward in the capitalist system are often purposefully hidden from view (Harvey 1990). Arguably, today, the veil over precarious labour has become rather close and heavy and is one of the mechanisms that keeps this labour in its place, helping to maintain the status-quo.

Geographers have been focused on the need to ‘defetishize’ commodities since at least the late 1980s. Most famously, Harvey (1990, p. 423) argued:

The grapes that sit upon the supermarket shelves are mute; we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitation upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from. We can, by further enquiry, lift the veil...But in so doing we find we have to go behind and beyond what the market itself reveals in order to understand how society is working.

Harvey drew on food (South African grapes) to illustrate his argument and the food sector, in particular, has been subject to critical Geographical enquiry amidst a drive to expose the production behind consumption. An innovative approach has been to follow the commodity, from ‘field to fork’, in “food-following research” (Cook, 2006). Still, the precarious (migrant) workers that constitute the vast majority of harvest workers in the EU remain largely obscured, as illustrated through a range of studies (e.g. Farinella and Nori 2021; Stachowski and Fialkowska 2021; Tollefesen et. al. 2021; to offer a few recent examples). This relates of course more broadly to the marginalising and unseeing of the wider contemporary ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011) and the ways in which low-wage migrants, in general, are veiled from public view and consciousness.

In the UK context in particular, the pervasive rural idyll (Bell, 2006; Short, 2006) also functions to mask rural deprivation in favour of a romantic portrayal of the countryside (Milbourne, 2004; Scott, Shenton and

Healey, 1991). Here the idyllic rural is the presumed cultural repository of authenticity, community, and nature (Hoey, 2009), an imaginary geography of homogeneity and stasis (Halfacree, 2014). In the UK the concept of the rural idyll, as a landscape construct that is both imagined and real, has considerable power over who is deemed to belong where and who is veiled from view (Halfacree 2014; O’Reilly 2014). As Short (2006, p. 144) notes:

For those who can afford it, the search for the rural idyll continues. And for those whose circumstances do not allow them to fit within the received and constantly reproduced ideas of the idyll, even as archetypal figures, marginalization also continues.

Of course, one cannot talk about the UK’s rural idyll, or about the broader veil over precarious labour, without a note on Brexit. The concept of the rural idyll does not fit with notions of change, diversity, and migrant labour, and so, in the context of Brexit, the rural is increasingly “represented as a conservative and besieged spatiality” (Halfacree, 2021, p. 202). As Halfacree (2021, p. 201) observes:

To understand more of the Brexit-rural link it helps to note how the world seemingly desired by much pro-Brexit discourse has a strong conservative to reactionary imagination that chimes strongly with similarly backward-looking rural representations.

Rural areas are thus characterised by a paradox in that they are sustained by precarious migrant labourers but favoured Brexit and the ending of free movement of EU labour. This paradox emerged out of a conservative and bucolic vision of rurality that does not sit well with an economic system based on the exploitation of international migrants.

## MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF HARVEST LABOUR

Media representations of migration have been widely studied, though few have examined the specific representations of rural harvest labour. Bauder (2005, 2008) – one of the first academics to address this gap – emphasises migrants’ “misplacement and unbelonging” and observes: “Migrant workers are not perceived as an integral, constitutive part of (the) rural landscape. Rather, they are represented as a foreign element in a landscape” (2005, p. 46-47), as cultural outsiders, economic assets or subordinate labour. Bauder concludes that media narratives combine to: “legitimate the exploitative and coercive labour practices experienced by migrant workers” (Bauder, 2005, p. 52). This interpretation is similar in many respects

to Torres, Popke and Hapke's (2006) discussion of the "silent bargain" whereby migrants are accepted in rural America as long as they work hard and do not visibly challenge the established fabric of rural society. Bauder (2008) goes on to identify three distinct media narratives surrounding (migrant) harvest labour: as an economic necessity for the farm; as a source of social problems in the rural community; and as a form of foreign aid for their families back home. In our own investigation, discussed below, we emphasise the 'economic necessity' narrative in particular.

To turn to the European context, Berg-Nordlie's (2018) examination of small-town media discourses found that an appreciation of immigrants dominated in new immigrant destinations in Norway. The positive 'hero-like' framing is summarised as follows: "As workers, immigrants are construed as not only beneficial, but downright necessary for local economic survival. The appreciative discourse on immigration's positive economic effect is hegemonic" (p218). Unfortunately, the same was not true for media coverage of refugees/ asylum seekers and Muslims in Norway's new immigrant destinations, where more commonplace (negative) media framings persisted. At the same time as the Norwegian study, Papadopoulos, Fratsea, and Mavrommatis (2018) reviewed media coverage of migrants in Greece's strawberry fields and found a tendency to highlight the over-exploitation and injustice faced by harvest workers. The emphasis by the Greek media on exploitation and injustice perhaps reflects a particular moment in industrial relations in Greece and/ or the particularly precarious workplace regimes in the country. The insights of Berg-Nordlie (2018) and Papadopolous et al. (2018), from Norway and Greece respectively, are noteworthy because they go against the grain of much of the traditional media reporting around immigration, with the UK press in particular tending to problematise migrants (Morrison, 2019).

#### METHODS: MEDIA ANALYSIS

Our news media analysis employed a version of Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA), as proposed by Altheide (2009). "'Discourse' here refers to framings of social phenomena that are maintained and changed by intersubjective practices such as talking and listening, writing and reading" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2006 in Berg-Nordlie 2018, p211). The process involved assessing the dimensions of the debate in mainstream newspapers by searching for themes and sub-themes using an iterative-inductive, interpretive analysis (O'Reilly, 2012). A constructivist inductivism, as in ECA, closely

tunes in to emerging themes within the initially selected sample. It then develops a grounded analysis drawing on disciplinary training, theoretical insights, research questions, and developing conceptual frameworks, to co-construct an interpretation that is rigorous and relevant. Specifically, the first step is an overall reading and familiarity with the entire data set, followed by open (descriptive) coding, focused (analytical) coding, then working with codes to cluster them into broader patterns of meaning and developing organising principles for making sense of the themes in the context of our research questions, theoretical frames, and critical analysis (O'Reilly, 2012).

Our goal was to examine the mediation, via national, regional and local newspapers, of the campaigns to get a domestic 'Land Army' to 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain'. We initially searched on the two terms we had identified as meaningful: 'Land Army' and 'Pick for Britain'. Only articles focused on UK labour issues in food production in the context of COVID-19 were selected. Duplicates were also filtered out. In addition, very small articles (such as one sentence letters) were omitted. Our search used the 'LexisLibrary UK' archive focused on the 'News' section and covered the six-month period of 01/03/20 to 01/09/20 and produced 89 useable results for 'Land Army' (see Table 1) and 45 useable results for 'Pick for Britain' (see Table 2). We chose to restrict our analysis to newspapers, following Smith, Deacon and Downey (2021), who argue that press analysis can provide a useful window onto wider mainstream representations.

Significantly, the UK newspaper media is extremely concentrated in the hands of a few core companies (and this is reflective of the mass media more generally). In terms of the national press, three companies make up 90% of the market: DMG Media (Daily Mail, Metro and i); News UK (The Sun, The Times); and Reach (The Mirror, The Express, The Star and The People). In terms of the regional and local press, six companies make up 83% of the market: Gannett UK (Newsquest); Reach; JPI Media; Tindle Newspapers; Archant; Iliffe Media (MRC, 2021). Details on market share, and associated concentration of ownership, are contained in Table 3. Politically and editorially, more of the national newspapers tend to clearly align themselves with the right-wing Conservative Party (especially The Telegraph, The Sun, The Express, The Daily Mail) than with the centre and centre-left parties in the UK. The main UK opposition party (The Labour Party) has only had consistent support, for example, from The Guardian and The Mirror over recent decades. In terms of circulation the top

**TABLE 1:**  
LEXISLIBRARY NEWSPAPER SEARCH FOR 'LAND ARMY'

Newspaper	Initial Results	Articles Selected
The Times and Sunday Times	46	8
Daily Telegraph and Sunday Telegraph	26	10
BBC Monitoring: International Reports	25	0
The Sun	24	5
Telegraph.co.uk	23	10
The Guardian	21	10
The Western Mail	18	4
Western Daily Press	18	7
The Daily and Sunday Mirror	17	1
The Independent	13	5
Eastern Daily Press	12	8
Daily Star Online	9	2
The Daily Express and Sunday Express	8	2
East Anglian Daily Times	7	3
Leicester Mercury	7	1
South Wales Echo	7	0
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	5	4
The Glasgow Herald	5	3
Other (less than 5 articles)	40	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>89</b>

national newspapers in the UK are (as of 2020): The Sun (23.15% share); Daily Mail (21.61% share); Metro (15.85% share); Daily Mirror (8.35% share); The Times (6.8% share); Daily Telegraph (5.56% share); Daily Express (5.43% share); Daily Star (5.11% share); i (3.43% share); Guardian (2.43% share); and Financial Times (2.29% share) (MRC, 2021: 4).

#### TIMELINE OF EVENTS

For some time now, and especially following the Brexit vote in 2016, UK horticultural employers have been concerned with harvest labour shortages and have sought to shape government policy in order to avoid imminent crises (Scott, 2022). The fears of 'crops rotting' because of Brexit intensified further in the face of COVID-19 and, from late-March 2020, UK farmers were calling for a new 'Land Army' (Daily Mail, 20/03/20; The Guardian, 20/03/20) to address fears about a diminishing supply of seasonal migrant labour. Some in the food industry estimated that as many as 90,000 jobs needed to be filled for the 2020 harvest (The Guardian, 25/03/20). As part of this recruitment, a network of labour providers made up of the Alliance of Ethical Labour Providers (comprised of HOPS, Concordia and Fruitful Jobs) and the Associa-

tion of Labour Providers launched the 'Feed the Nation' campaign. The UK then entered lockdown from around 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and fears of crops being left unharvested escalated as borders closed. By April and the Guardian worried: "Fruit and vegetable crops... risk rotting in the fields - putrefying testaments to the coronavirus pandemic" (The Guardian, 03/04/20).

Despite the 'Feed the Nation' campaign it was estimated that by May only 112 people had been accepted through this campaign onto on-farm roles (Daily Record, 20/05/20). At the same time as British-based workers were apparently struggling to help 'Feed the Nation', some farmers had been flying their own workers into the UK from abroad with a Daily Mail headline on April 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 announcing heroically: "Romanian fruit pickers flown in to help farmers short of labour". Around this time, the UK government launched the 'Pick for Britain' campaign supported by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB), the Association of Labour Providers (ALP); British Growers; Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA); Greater Lincolnshire Local Economic Partnership; and the National Farmers Union (NFU). In both the 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain' campaigns, the emphasis was very much on attracting

**TABLE 2:**  
LEXISLIBRARY NEWSPAPER SEARCH FOR 'PICK FOR BRITAIN'

Newspaper	Initial Results	Articles Selected	Articles Selected Less Duplicates with 'Land Army' search
The Times and Sunday Times	58	9	5
The Sun	50	2	1
Telegraph.co.uk	31	10	6
Daily and Sunday Telegraph	27	7	1
Western Mail	18	3	2
Western Daily Press	18	3	2
The Guardian	16	3	1
The Express	16	5	3
The Mirror	14	3	2
The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday	13	4	2
The Independent	13	5	2
South Wales Echo	12	1	0
Hull Daily Mail	9	0	0
Grimsby Telegraph	8	1	1
The Sentinel (Stoke)	8	1	1
Eastern Daily Press	7	6	1
Leicester Mercury	7	0	0
Plymouth Herald	7	0	0
Birmingham Evening Mail	6	1	1
Daily Star	6	4	3
Derby Telegraph	6	0	0
Evening gazette	6	0	0
Liverpool Echo	6	0	0
Manchester Evening News	6	0	0
Nottingham Post	6	0	0
Aberdeen Press and Journal	5	3	2
East Anglian Daily Times	5	4	2
Evening Standard	5	0	0
Other (less than 5)	31	15	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>420</b>	<b>90</b>	<b>45</b>

British workers – as part of what was widely referred to as a 'Land Army' – into temporary agricultural jobs.

With the 'Pick for Britain' campaign established, the Environment Secretary George Eustice argued June would be the crunch time, saying:

We estimate that probably only about a third of the migrant labour that would normally come to the UK is here, and was probably here before lockdown. We are working with industry to identify an approach that will encourage those millions of furloughed workers in some cases to consider taking a second job, helping get the harvest in in June. (Daily Star, 26/04/20)

Following on from this April intervention, on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Prince Charles launched a video appeal to provide renewed impetus for the Pick for Britain campaign as the summer harvest loomed. A lot of media coverage surrounded this rallying call, as it did in March for the Feed the Nation launch and in April for the Pick for Britain launch. However, in the event, very few UK residents entered the fields to get the 2020 harvest in (BBC, 2020).

Figure 1 summarises the key events pertinent to this paper. It is important to remember that, whilst we are focused on COVID-19, one cannot ignore the issue of Brexit and the question of whether the Home Of-

TABLE 3:  
THE CONCENTRATION OF UK NEWSPAPER MEDIA OWNERSHIP

	Market Share (Year)	Notable Details
<b>NATIONAL UK PRESS</b>		
DMG Media	38.26% (2020)	The 4 <sup>th</sup> Viscount Rothmere is the chairman and controlling shareholder of DMG Media.
News UK	32.16% (2020)	News UK is a subsidiary of News Corp. The founder and executive chairman of News Corp is Rupert Murdoch.
Reach	19.42% (2020)	Reach is owned by various shareholders, the largest holding around a 12% stake.
<b>REGIONAL/ LOCAL UK PRESS</b>		
Gannett UK (Newsquest)	23.2% (2021)	Newsquest is the UK subsidiary of Gannett Inc, the largest news publisher in the US.
Reach	20.7% (2021)	See above.
JPI Media	18.0% (2021)	JPI Media was bought for £10.2m by National World in 2020.
Tindle Newspapers	7.8% (2021)	A family owned company (the Tindle family)
Archant	7.1% (2021)	In 2020 Archant was bought by a private equity firm, but then put up for sale 18 months later.
Iliffe Media	7.0% (2021)	A family owned company (the Illiffe family)

Source: (MRC, 2021)

FIGURE 1:  
TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Date	Event
23 June 2016	Brexit vote
20 March 2020	'Feed the Nation' campaign launched in response to fears over migrant labour supply due to COVID-19. UK farmers first call for a new domestic 'Land Army' in the face of COVID-19.
23 March 2020	UK effectively enters the first COVID-19 lockdown.
27 March 2020	Environment Secretary (George Eustice) calls for British workers to mobilise to get 2020 harvest in.
Early April 2020	UK government launches the 'Pick for Britain' campaign. Pick for Britain was supported with a DEFRA budget of £83,500, which some described as a "pittance" given the apparent size of the labour supply crisis (FarmingUK, 2020). Of this £83,500 budget, £29,800 was actually spent by DEFRA (DEFRA, 2021).
Mid April 2020	Farmers reported in press flying migrant workers into the UK for the 2020 harvest. Two of the main bodies behind the 'Feed the Nation' campaign (HOPS and Concordia) stated on their websites to the prospective UK 'Land Army' that there were in effect no harvest vacancies and to try again from late May.
20 April 2020	Data was released on the 'Feed the Nation' campaign, with an impressive 50,000 applications of interest.
26 April 2020	Environment Secretary (George Eustice) once again stresses the shortage of seasonal migrant workers due to COVID-19 and emphasises that furloughed British-based workers should consider taking a second job for the summer harvest.
19 May 2020	Prince Charles launched a video appeal to provide renewed impetus for the Pick for Britain campaign. This appeal was widely reported in the UK press.
20 May 2020	Further analysis of the 'Feed the Nation' campaign showed that of all the applications of interest there were: 6,000 interviews, 1,000 job offers and, of these, 900 people rejected them and only 112 people were eventually accepted onto on-farm roles.
October 2020	An autopsy of the 2020 Summer harvest season by the NFU showed that only 11% of seasonal workers were UK residents (BBC, 2020). Figures from HOPS (an organisation behind Feed the Nation) were even starker: of around 30,000 applications from Britons 4% took up jobs, and only around 1% stayed past six weeks (BBC, 2020). The UK government, however, was unable to provide detailed figures on the 'Pick for Britain' scheme (DEFRA, 2021).
31 December 2020	Ending of freedom of movement due to the June 2016 Brexit vote.
24 December 2021	Seasonal worker scheme announced for UK horticulture, following the 2019-2021 'Seasonal Worker Pilot', with an upper limit of 40,000 visas by 2023.



fice would introduce a mechanism to allow seasonal migrant workers into horticulture after 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020 (when freedom of movement ended). Throughout 2019-2020, there was a 'Seasonal Worker Pilot' scheme of 2,500 in 2019 and 10,000 visas in 2020. Then, after the ending of free movement, the seasonal worker scheme was expanded to 30,000 visas (2021) and then 40,000 visas (for 2023). The fact remains, however, that agricultural employers faced massive dual uncertainty in the face of both COVID-19 and Brexit and were continually lobbying government as a result (Scott, 2022). The paper, whilst focused on COVID-19, needs considering with this Brexit context in mind.

### A HEROIC NATIONALISTIC RHETORIC

The language of mobilising a 'Land Army' to 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain' – the three main epithets used by employers, labour providers, government and the media in the COVID-19 agricultural labour supply crisis – invokes a heroic and nationalistic narrative. This narrative provides work that is essentially low-wage, seasonal and insecure with new, positive, symbolism and meaning. In the sections that follow we examine this narrative in detail as represented by the UK newspaper media; highlighting first the heroic emphasis associated with metaphors of war; then identifying the three key roles/ actors in this wartime narrative (the victim-hero farmer; the good migrant; and the reluctant British understudy) that serve to emphasise the focus on the actions of key players rather than structural conditions; before finally looking back-stage at how the negative facets of precarious work were discussed and represented.

### Motivating Metaphors of War

The dominant media narrative during the COVID-19 harvest labour supply crisis invoked World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) rhetoric to emphasise nationalistic fight and sacrifice for the common good of securing the UK's food supply. This heroic narrative is most immediately visible in the naming of the campaign as 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain'. Within both these campaigns there were calls for a domestic 'Land Army' to mobilise. These three labels were used extensively by employers, employer representatives, government, and royalty; and the media throughout the COVID-19 crisis reproduced these labels and associated imagery.

Early on in the COVID-19 crisis the Daily Mail explained the harvest labour supply problem as follows: "In the Second World War groups of young

women made up the Land Girls who worked in the fields to keep food on tables. With the UK on a war footing against COVID-19, similar measures are now needed, the industry says" (Daily Mail, 20/03/20). Similarly, the Daily Express reported: "Farmers say the fallout from the pandemic has left them desperately short of workers – and they need an army of Land Girls and boys to harvest their crops" (The Express, 21/03/20). The Land Army rhetoric and alarmist predictions were not just confined to the tabloids. The Guardian, for example, reported the view of the Country Land and Business Association (CLA): "We must recognise that farmers' supply of labour is in jeopardy. A shortage of 80,000 workers is something we have never seen before. That is why we are calling for a land army of employees to support farmers in feeding the country...Time is of the essence. If we fail to find these key workers, businesses will go bust" (The Guardian, 20/03/20). The Telegraph went further:

The Government is preparing to launch a Land Army-style 'Pick for Britain' campaign to prevent crops rotting in fields, The Telegraph understands, after ministers were urged by farmers to consider deploying Army reservists. A nationwide initiative is expected to be launched within weeks to encourage anyone from university students to laid off hospitality workers to pick fruit and vegetables in the 'national interest'...The campaign carries echoes of 'Dig for Victory' and the Women's Land Army, the two major national campaigns launched during the Second World War in order to keep the nation fed. It comes amid fears that British crops are now at risk of rotting in the ground due to severe shortages of seasonal labourers from eastern Europe as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. (Telegraph Online, 26/03/20)

Similarly, The Independent reported that food could be "rotting in the fields" if farmers' 'call to arms' is not answered (The Independent, 27/03/20). The Times also reported in a similar alarmist fashion a few days later (The Times, 30/03/20).

In just ten days then, from March 20<sup>th</sup> to March 30<sup>th</sup> 2020, we see all sections of the UK media (broadsheet and tabloid, right-wing and left-wing) reporting the harvest labour supply crisis in a consistent manner. In the local and regional press, the picture was also very similar. The Norwich Evening News (NEN) talked, for instance, of "Churchillian rhetoric", a "call to arms" and a "wartime spirit to inspire a new Land Army to get this important job done" (NEN, 28/03/20). 500 miles north, the Aberdeen Press and Journal (APJ)

likewise talked of a “call to arms...to mobilise an army of workers to take to the fields and stop the country’s valuable crops rotting into the ground...a throwback to the Dig for Victory movement and Women’s Land Army of the Second World War” (APJ, 28/03/20).

Some newspapers went back even further, to Lord Kitchener’s 1914 ‘Your Country Needs You’ World War I propaganda campaign. A Daily Telegraph headline from late March, for example, proclaimed: “Your farmers need you!” (Daily Telegraph, 27/03/20). More playfully, The Sun’s headline from the following month stated simply: “Your Plum Tree Needs You!” (The Sun, 10/04/20).

Around the time of The Sun’s headline, it was clear that some British workers were entering horticulture. The Telegraph celebrated “The British labourers digging for victory” (The Telegraph, 12/04/20) and noted: “in recent weeks something never envisaged has occurred. A nationwide call for British seasonal labourers to offer their services to replace an expected shortfall of 70,000 migrant workers this year has led to a surge in people volunteering” (*ibid.*). Similarly, The Daily Express found that: “So far 30,000 Brits have joined the new Land Army (Daily Express, 15/04/20).

In May 2020 there was pressure to re-invigorate the ‘Pick for Britain’ campaign as it was felt that there would be shortages from June. Prince Charles was asked to help with this and his intervention on 19<sup>th</sup> May 2020, via a video appeal, was widely reported in the press. Once again heroic wartime rhetoric was deployed by the Prince:

This is why that great movement of the Second World War - the Land Army - is being rediscovered in the newly created ‘Pick For Britain’ campaign. In the coming months, many thousands of people will be needed to bring in the crops. It will be hard graft but is hugely important if we are to avoid the growing crops going to waste. I do not doubt that the work will be unglamorous and, at times, challenging. But it is of the utmost importance and, at the height of this global pandemic, you will be making a vital contribution to the national effort. So, I can only urge you to Pick For Britain. (EADP, 23/05/20)

Thus, throughout March, April and May 2020 – the months when harvest labour supply was seen as being at crisis point – there was a strong and consistent wartime narrative drawing on nationalism, patriotism and the notion of working for a common good that served to sustain both the fetishism of commodities, with its masking of the realities of production, and the

rural idyll’s role in casting the countryside as conservative and bucolic.

### Three Leading Roles

We identified three leading roles within the wartime epic outlined above: the ‘victim-hero farmer’ facing crisis; the ‘good migrants’ struggling to get to the UK; and their ‘reluctant British-based understudies’. Each of these served to draw attention to agents’ potential responses to perceived crises, rather than locate the problem in the context of broader, neoliberal, political-economic structures.

First, farmers were portrayed as facing a uniquely challenging position with respect to COVID-19 (with Brexit also looming large) and the difficulties of accessing the usually reliable and highly productive seasonal migrants. Reporting positioned them, without exception, in a positive light and the media relied on testimony from employers and employer organisations much more than on the testimony of workers. In March 2020, the Western Daily Press (WDP) headline read: “Farmers are our ‘hidden heroes’” quoting George Eustice the Environment Minister as saying: “In many cases you are the hidden heroes, and the country is grateful for all that you have done”(WDP, 31/03/20). A few months later Prince Charles stressed in a similar vein: “Food does not happen by magic, it all begins with our remarkable farmers and growers” (Glasgow Herald, 19/05/20).<sup>2</sup> One of the few summer articles on the labour supply crisis, in the Western Mail (WM), had the headline: “Come rain or shine, Brexit or coronavirus, Southern England Farms have answered the call of duty to keep the nation fed” (WM, 07/07/20). Here war metaphors illustrate the farmers’ role of victim-hero, and distract from the nature of the work involved in harvest production (McAllister, 2011).

Migrant harvest workers were generally not consulted for their expert views on the labour crisis. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that news media so often portrays migrants in a negative light, they were represented very positively during the COVID-19 reporting as the ‘good migrants’ of our second leading role (see also Bauder, 2005, 2008; Berg-Nordlie, 2018). This is consistent with much of the research on migrant labour in the food production sector, where a ‘good migrant’ stereotype tends to prevail (McAravey, 2017; Scott, 2013b; Scott and Rye, 2021; Shubin et al., 2014). With the headline: “Lettuce help - Romanians come to rescue of farmers” The Times reported glowingly on low-wage migrant harvest workers (The

Times, 19/04/20). Similarly, The Telegraph reported an employer's view that:

Whenever the lockdown is lifted, he expects it to be once more foreign labourers flying in to fill the void. And as with care home workers, delivery drivers and the whole invisible army of people that keep this country moving whose efforts have been drawn out of the shadows by COVID-19 - when they do he hopes that all of us regard their efforts with a renewed appreciation. (Daily Telegraph, 12/04/20)

Note this glowing portrayal of migrants concerns a specific type of low-wage migrant (Serban, Molinero-Gerbeau, and Deliu, 2021): from Central and Eastern Europe, generally young, largely living onsite. It will be interesting to see whether such positivity remains in place as the origins/ type of harvest worker in the UK evolves following Brexit and the ending of free movement.

The migrant as economic asset was often juxtaposed with less flattering views of domestic British workers. As the following Times headlines exemplify: "Farmers fear disaster as new Land Army enters the field; British fruit pickers are struggling with the demands of work done in the past by migrants" (The Times, 02/05/20) and "Britain won't work without unskilled migrants; From fruit pickers to carers, the country is crying out for foreign workers and it's a fallacy to say Britons want those jobs" (The Times, 21/05/20). This enhances the role of the 'good migrant' and brings us on to the third leading role: the 'reluctant British understudy' (by understudy we mean a source of reserve labour that has been ascribed a key role but is unwilling and unlikely to ever perform this role).

Early on in the COVID-19 crisis there was the expectation that a British 'Land Army' would march, but little evidence to support this assumption. As the data came in on the 'Feed the Nation' campaign in late April 2020, The Times explained:

Only 112 of the 50,000 people who signed up to join the Land Army of fruit and vegetable pickers have taken up roles, after thousands dropped out upon realising what the job would actually entail. Reasons for turning down the work were said to be farms too far from home, not wanting to commute or care responsibilities that prevented full-time work. (The Times, 29/04/20)

The following month, after Prince Charles' intervention in the 'Pick for Britain' campaign, headlines once again implied the British were reluctant understudies:

"Charles: we need pickers who are stickers; Prince calls for Land Army to harvest fruit and veg after thousands reject jobs because they are 'too hard'" (Daily Telegraph, 19/05/20). The Daily Telegraph article goes on: "Thousands dropped out, according to the Alliance of Ethical Labour Providers, as they learned the reality of the eight-hours-a-day job picking crops in all weathers potentially miles from home".

There was similar frustration with the reluctant British understudies in the local and regional media. The Western Mail (WM) produced an autopsy of the situation in July 2020:

In response to the Government's Pick for Britain campaign, launched earlier this year to channel the spirit of the Second World War's 'Land Army' and encourage the British population to take up jobs picking fruit and vegetables, (the farmer) says he received "hundreds" of applications, with the majority being from British people. But, once whittled down through interviews and trials, the numbers were far less impressive. (WM, 07/07/20)

Few newspapers defended the 'reluctant understudy' role given to the British. The Guardian headline was a rare exception: "'Just not true' we're too lazy for farm work, say frustrated UK applicants; Jobseekers take issue with pay and terms and allege farmers favouring migrant labour" (The Guardian, 20/04/20). This headline captures a key issue around the quality of work on offer in agriculture (Rogaly, 2008), something brushed over by most of the UK media.

### Looking Back-Stage

With the consistent media reporting around harvest labour and COVID-19 there were notable absences and issues that remained 'back-stage'. Most obviously, precarious work and precarious workers invariably got subsumed within heroic war-time metaphors and the three leading roles. There were moments, however, when the media got close to lifting the veil over precarious work and precarious workers as The Guardian headline above makes clear. More commonly, though, articles emphasised euphemistically that harvest work and rural communities were 'not what they were'. One informant challenged the war metaphors and told The Guardian:

I find the rhetoric of the land army unhelpful...That's looking back how things were through rose-tinted spectacles. Our businesses aren't like that anymore. The rhetoric may bring forward large numbers of people but some only want to do the odd day here and there

or don't want to do the hours that are required. That's very difficult for business. What we want is people who will sign up and commit. (The Guardian, 20/05/20)

In a similar vein, a grower told The Daily Telegraph: "There is a perception that fruit picking is a bit like the Darling Buds of May [an historic drama set in 1950s rural England], but it is an agribusiness and we need a well organised, well run work force. We have to pay by the hour, but we get paid by the kilo...If we don't get enough of the right people in time, we will end up losing a lot of fruit" (Daily Telegraph, 20/05/20). The Weston Daily Press (WDP) also observed, following Prince Charles' intervention that:

There is a certain dewy-eyed romanticism about farm work for some social classes in Britain. Blame all those beautifully-shot countryside films of the Thomas Hardy novels or a shirtless Aidan Turner scything his way into a million hearts as Ross Poldark in the BBC1 series. In the same way that a cottage in the country is at the top of many a would-be millionaire's wish list, so the feeling that good honest toil bringing in the harvest is the purest form of work has burned itself into urban Britain's consciousness. (WDP, 20/05/20)

The observations that 'things have changed' are essentially euphemisms for harvest jobs being tough and demanding, which of course threatens the bucolic and conservative view of the countryside encapsulated in the UK's rural idyll.

Those few who moved on from euphemistically observing 'things have changed' to actually profiling the tough and demanding harvest work, often did so, however, by also emphasising the potential pay and/or the honour associated with getting the harvest in. This is evident in the following Daily Mail extract:

They'll pick from 6am to 6pm, with just 60 minutes' break. Each day, they'll walk almost four miles, bend down some 20,000 times and break at least one knife. Pretty much all of them hail from Poland and Lithuania. Drawn by the pay, bonuses and subsidised accommodation in caravans on site, they come back year after year...This is no job for the fainthearted...even regular migrant workers are broken after the first couple of days of the season, before their back and glutes toughen up. (Daily Mail, 28/04/20)

Similarly, a few weeks after this account, Prince Charles emphasised harvest work was "unglamorous and, at times, challenging" with "hard graft...hugely important" and a "vital contribution to the national effort" (Telegraph Online, 25/05/20).

Rarely did the media consult workers or worker representatives in constructing their accounts of the COVID-19 harvest labour crisis. Likewise, identification of precarious work, never mind criticism of it, was largely absent. Despite this, the UK media did at points look back-stage, albeit in quite coded ways, acknowledging for example how: 'things have changed'; the 'honour and reward' in hard work; and the 'unglamorous and challenging' nature of getting the harvest in.

## CONCLUSIONS

The paper illustrates the role of UK newspaper media (local, regional and national) in perpetuating the mask that veils the true nature of precarious work. The media reporting of the 2020 COVID-19 crisis and its' impact on UK farming uncritically adopted the 'Land Army', 'Feed the Nation' and 'Pick for Britain' epithets, with very little focus on the voices of harvest workers, Trade Unions or worker representatives. Testimony in the news articles came largely from employers, employer representatives, government and royalty. Nationalistic wartime rhetoric was evoked that emphasised the valiant nature of harvest work and framed migrant workers as (temporary) heroes who help sustain the UK countryside (Bauder, 2005, 2008; Berg-Nordlie, 2018). British/local worker reluctance to embrace precarity was framed as a failure of them as workers rather than as a structural failure to create decent work.

Overall, then, the media analysis underlines the selective and managed unveiling of precarious work. That precarious worker voices were largely absent in the reporting of a labour supply crisis is very telling, as is the contrasting way in which migrant and would-be British-based workers were reported on. The former seen as economic assets and the latter as personal failures, without any sustained reference to the problematics of precarious work. The UK media is heavily concentrated in the hands of a few large companies (see Table 3) and is traditionally skewed towards a right-wing political lens. This lens appears to frame precarious work in a way that is uncritical, fails to engage with workers themselves, and emphasises the value and honour in hard-work whatever the pay and working conditions. It is a lens that is sympathetic to the plight of employers, in terms of getting a good low-wage labour supply, rather than being sympathetic to workers, in terms of securing decent work. It also serves to sustain the roles of commodity fetishism in masking production and the rural idyll in casting rural life as romantic and conservative.

Going forward, the UK government (like the UK media) does not see precarious harvest work as particularly problematic. Instead, policy is framed around how best to secure a suitable supply of precarious workers. To achieve this, the government announced (in late December 2021) the extension and expansion of a seasonal worker scheme to bring up to 40,000 harvest workers into the country from abroad to work in UK horticulture for up to six months a year. At the same time the government did also call for farmers to look towards local British-based labour and new technology to get the harvest in; aware no doubt of the possible negative reactions to immigration expansion, given that Brexit was substantively based around stopping (especially low-wage) immigration. The media analysis presented above would suggest that, at least in the short to medium-term, it will be the 40,000 seasonal foreign workers that will prevent a harvest crisis in UK horticulture. In some senses, both the media and the government have, over recent years, set up British-based labour to fail: stopping crops from rotting in the fields is one thing; providing the pay and conditions to enable British-based workers to do this is quite another.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Brexit – with the ending of EU freedom of movement in the UK on 31/12/20 – also constituted a parallel threat to harvest labour supply at the time of the COVID-19 crisis.
- 2 Prince Charles' May 2020 intervention was more widely reported than that of the Environment Secretary George Eustice.