

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s

Review Number:

350

Publish date:

Friday, 1 August, 2003

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ISBN:

851159346X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

283pp.

Publisher:

Boydell Press

Place of Publication:

Woodbridge

Reviewer:

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In Stephen Reynolds's *A Poor Man's House*, first published in 1908, he gives a loving description of the 'baked dinner' that 'Mam Widger' would cook, when funds permitted, for the Sidmouth fishing family with whom he lived:

This is the recipe for baked dinner:

Turn out the children and turn on the oven. Into the middle of a large baking tin place a saucer piled up with a mixture of herbs (mainly parsley), one sliced onion and breadcrumbs, the whole made sticky with a morsel of dripping. Round about the saucer put a layer of large peeled potatoes, and on top of all, the joint. Set the baking tin on the hob and into it pour just enough warm water to run over the rim of the saucer. Soon after the water boils, transfer the whole to a fairly quick oven. When the meat is brown outside, slow the oven down. Serve piping hot from the oven, placing the tin on a folded newspaper and the joint, if large, on a hot plate.⁽¹⁾

Half a century later, as the restrictions of post-war austerity lifted, Richard Hoggart reflected on the importance of 'something tasty' in working-class diet as he grew up in working-class Leeds:

The emphasis on tastiness shows itself most clearly in the need to provide 'something for tea', at weekends if not each day. There is a great range of favourite savouries, often by-products - black-puddings, pig's feet, liver, cowheel, tripe, polony, 'ducks', chitterlings (and for special occasions pork-pies, which are extremely popular); and the fishmongers' savouries - shrimps, roe, kippers and mussels. In our house we lived simply for most of the week; breakfast was usually bread and beef-dripping, dinner a good simple stew; something tasty was provided for the workers at tea-time, but nothing costing more than a few coppers. At the weekend we lived largely, like everyone else except the very poor, and Sunday tea was the peak. By six on that evening the middens up the back had a fine topcoat of empty salmon and fruit tins.(2)

I quote these classic (and, of course, highly problematic) texts at length here because they draw attention to one of several remarkable absences in Derek Oddy's history of British diet from the 1890s to the 1990s. In this substantial book we hear hardly anything from the consumers of food, and least of all from working-class consumers. Flora Thompson gets an extended quote, to illustrate popular resistance to unfamiliar foods, on page 30; and there are several subsequent quotations from the Second World War diaries of middle-class women on pages 144-61. Throughout the book, however, official voices - especially those of the social observer, the civil servant, the nutritionist and the statistician - mediate between the reader and the experience, and we break our teeth on the hard tack of statistical tables, ascribed average consumption levels of particular food categories drawn from dietary surveys, and levels of nutrition that are assumed to be calculable from such sources. There is no allowance in the calculations for change over time in food values or variation in the quality of the food that was bought (through, for example, changes in the extent and nature of adulteration, or in the incidence of buying cheap food at or beyond the end of its market-stall or shelf life to make money go further at the expense of quality or food safety).(3) We are not allowed access to the delights of the savoury relish or the sweet-shop counter, to the appetising smell of frying bacon or the beery fumes of the bar parlour. Nor are we brought into contact with the multitude of regional and local variations in delicacies, textures, preferences and styles of food presentation that were still so evident in the 1960s and have still not disappeared under the globalising onslaught of fast and 'fusion' food.(4)

The autobiographies and oral histories that provide so many insights into what people ate, how they prepared it, the strategies they adopted for improving variety and palatability and for making slender resources go further, and what they thought about their diet, are entirely absent from this account, and the historians who have presented and argued about this material find no recognition in its pages, and are omitted from its bibliography. The reader would never find out from these pages about (for example) the controversy surrounding Elizabeth Roberts's stimulating notion of the 'textile diet' of early twentieth-century Lancashire, or about David Elliston Allen's intriguing attempts to map dietary patterns and preferences across the British provinces of the mid-twentieth century.(5) Nor would the riches of the Mass-Observation archive for these purposes become apparent.(6) But perhaps most surprising of all is the absence of any reference to the agenda proposed by Stephen Mennell, who made use of the theories of Norbert Elias to try to understand changes in food, taste and eating habits in England and France over the *longue durée*, or to the work of the Oxford, Leeds and London seminars on the history of food over the last twenty years.(7) If the author rejects the validity of such approaches, or wishes to discard them for present purposes, he should at least explain his position.

Despite the broad remit suggested by the title, this book has very specific academic aims, as the author indicates in the preface. The decision to exclude recipes, as such, distances the book from more descriptive and celebratory, and less academic, outpourings, although it also cuts off an avenue that might have led to a critical assessment of what contemporaries enjoyed and appreciated about their food, as in the Reynolds and Hoggart citations at the beginning of this review. Professor Oddy is concerned almost exclusively with what he describes (without defining it) as 'mainstream' food consumption, and he has consciously excluded such apparent manifestations of eccentricity as vegetarianism and 'food fads', or such implicitly fringe issues as allergies and the organic food movement. It is obviously more than possible to take issue with such

exclusions, especially as the book's chronological coverage extends to the 1990s. The book's title promises a more inclusive agenda, with its enticing highlighting of 'fusion food' as a key theme; but the almost complete absence of discussion of this concept, which is dealt with in two sentences on page 233, is symptomatic of a more pervasive narrowness. We shall see that the omissions mentioned by the author himself actually constitute the tip of a much bigger iceberg.

The book is actually concerned with aspects of food consumption, policy and business in twentieth-century Britain. Professor Oddy pulls together and extends his earlier work on family budget surveys, of which there were a remarkable number; and he constructs tables to represent the calorific content and nutritional make-up of these recorded (and until the mid-twentieth century mainly working-class) dietaries, seeking to measure the fluctuating nutritional value and changing content of the food consumed. From this angle he engages with the 'poverty line' debates of the turn of the century, the controversy over alleged malnutrition in the depressed areas of the 1930s, and the debate over the impact of rationing on diet and health in the two World Wars and especially the extended period of control that followed the Second World War. His analysis of food policy is particularly interesting on the Ministry of Health's resistance to taking the evidence of new scientific understandings of nutrition on board during the 1930s, as part of a concern to defuse potentially emotive and politically damaging debate about the living standards of the unemployed and especially their children, and on its post-war readiness to assume the undeserved credit for the ascribed successes of Second World War food policy. Discussion of the 1930s is, however, lacking in focus and makes the reader work unnecessarily hard, and it might be added that Charles Smith treated a lot of the issues with greater clarity in 1940.[\(8\)](#)

It is surprising that the author does not extend his critical comments to the post-war activities of MAFF; but the lack of bite in his analysis here is indicated by his acceptance of the formula that foot and mouth disease 'closed the countryside' in 2001, when what actually closed it was the attitude of government and the NFU to an intrinsically almost unproblematic disease, which had been elevated to the status of a plague through political manipulation by economic vested interests, and through failure to learn from the recent past.[\(9\)](#) Professor Oddy's representation of the end of post-war rationing as 'the revival of choice' is similarly question-begging: there certainly was increased choice, especially for those who could afford it, but the Whiggish label provided here might have come from the propaganda of the British Housewives' League or the Conservative Party, and a more careful reading of Zweiniger-Bargielowska's book on austerity in post-war Britain might have ushered in a more nuanced approach.[\(10\)](#) Any examination of twentieth-century food and agricultural policy needs to sustain a critical perspective on party politics and the work of the relevant government departments, and this book does so only intermittently.

The third main strand of the book, an account of developments in food technology and the business of food manufacturing, is basically descriptive, with a tendency to dissolve into lists. It is perhaps strongest on the rise of refrigeration. Significant lacunae occur, however, as with the treatment of the history of ice cream, which assumes that its history as a commodity began with Wall's in the inter-war years, and takes no account of earlier developments on a broader front. Here as elsewhere, the ethnic dimensions (in this case Italian) to specialised foodstuff provision are given short shrift.[\(11\)](#) Critical analysis of the processes of innovation and their implications is confined to throwaway lines, some of which are suitably acerbic and might have been developed further in the text. The summary of the growth of McDonald's British operations, for example, makes no mention of the controversies surrounding the rise of this and other fast food chains, and Ritzer's important McDonaldisation thesis, with the literature it has spawned, is absent from text and bibliography.[\(12\)](#) Lobstein's work on fast foods and nutrition is mentioned only to show the growth in the numbers of outlets and meals sold: its analysis of the content of such meals, and their health implications, is ignored.[\(13\)](#) The debate on genetically modified organisms, which brings together issues of business, politics and policy, and might have been expected to provide a culmination to the book's arguments, is barely mentioned. And where is globalization, the other face of 'fusion food', in this account?

Another important omission is the lack of attention paid to food retailing, apart from outline business histories of the main retail chains of the late twentieth century, with an increasing dependence on public relations hand-outs towards the end of the book. Some use is made of parliamentary papers and the trade

press for earlier periods, but this produces more quotation than interpretation, and the extensive literature on the development of 'systems of provision' in the twentieth-century food trades does not feature. The book is weak on the history of food retailing, with little or no attention to the development of the historiography since Peter Mathias's *Retailing Revolution* (London: Longman) in 1967 and Michael Winstanley's *The Shopkeeper's World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) in 1983. Winstanley's subsequent work on food retailing, together with that of (for example) John Benson, Gareth Shaw, Roger Scola (especially Scola's study of the food supply of Victorian Manchester, which should have been essential to the first chapter of this book), along with that of Hodson and (in collaboration) Schmiechen and Carls on retail food markets and market halls, and of Gurney and others on the Co-operative movement (on which the only work cited is that of Birchall), make no contribution to the argument of this book; and it is impoverished without them.(14)

Nor are farming, fishing and the transport of foodstuffs from producer to market given an adequate treatment: the sections on fish and milk in Chapter 2, for example, which ostensibly deals with food supply between 1890 and 1914, are based on scattered primary sources without taking account of the research of (for example) Robb Robinson on North Sea trawling and fish transport, or P.J. Atkins on London's railway milk trade.(15) Questions of transport and the nature of retail provision had a considerable effect on the quality and variety of food as delivered to the consumer, especially in the period before refrigeration was general in shops; but these issues have changed their form in recent years without ceasing to be important. Their treatment in this book is cursory in the extreme.

The book's main research base, however, is founded on Professor Oddy's meticulous analysis of a large number of collections of domestic budgets. The fruits of earlier phases of this research have appeared in various places over many years, but this book pulls it all together. This is, however, highly problematic material. The comparative analysis over time of dietary composition and nutritional value from survey data makes heroic assumptions about the accuracy of the surveys. Those who kept diaries and disclosed diets were a self-selecting group, no doubt with unusually disciplined and deferential habits; and they were, or came to be, well aware of the values and prejudices of those who were gazing upon and judging them, especially when we consider the early surveys before the First World War.

Michel Foucault haunts this discussion, like so many others. Stephen Reynolds, a middle-class man who sought to share working-class lives, and developed his own distinctive economic and social theories in the process, applied harsh words to the earnest reformers who predominated among the investigators:

Food reformers: patrons of cookery schools where they try, happily in vain, to teach the pupils to prepare dishes no working man would adventure on; physical degenerates who fear that unless the working man imitates them, he will become as degenerate as they are, and quite unfit to do the world's rough work - forget that whereas they have only one staple food, if that, namely bread, the poor man has several dishes which he likes so well that he is loth (*sic*) to touch any other.(16)

We do not need to endorse the whole of Reynolds's indictment to accept that the provision of budgets involved a clash between conflicting cultures, and created a situation in which the observer's presence was likely to alter the nature of the evidence presented. Hence the high probability of the selective omission of foods and practices that were likely to generate disapproval, especially alcohol of all kinds (after all, beer does have food value), and tasty treats cooked outside the home, such as fish and chips. The absences from the early dietary surveys, taken at face value, would make it very hard to understand the strength of the brewing interest, or the meteoric rise of the fish and chip shop, or the enormous numbers of greengrocers' and confectioners' shops in the industrial towns. The low level of fish consumption identified in the surveys is remarkable, especially in the light of the very full collection of material on this theme in the Public Record Office, where a group of civil servants in the 1930s became fascinated by the complexity and importance of the fish trades.(17) Interestingly, too, in the light of current concerns, the surveys seem unable to take account of the amount of salt in the diet, and there must surely be other omissions and approximations.(18) The problem of accounting for food consumed outside the home (with, no doubt, a high salt content) is admitted for the late twentieth century, when the rise of eating out and the fast food industries is too obvious

to neglect; but it should also be considered for earlier periods. The dietary survey material cries out for triangulation and careful critical analysis; but in this book it is treated as if it were an objective source, capable of generating trustworthy quantitative conclusions that can be compared over time. I suggest that this is not the case.

A real strength to set against these problems, however, is the author's awareness of the importance of age and gender, and especially status as a contributor to the family's income and to the distribution of food within the family; the way in which women accepted and consented to an even more limited diet than that of their husbands, despite doing their own heavy manual labour in the home, is a very important theme. It is a pity, then, that it is not taken further by making use of the oral history studies (and collections) that are available, or by taking up the wider insights into the meanings ascribed to housework and domestic cookery that can be gleaned from the work of (especially feminist) sociologists and anthropologists.[\(19\)](#)

There is, potentially, a great deal more to be said, for a further besetting problem of this book is its failure to engage with the growing literature on consumption, identity, consumerism and the state, as pioneered by Matthew Hilton, Martin Daunton and associates.[\(20\)](#) Questions of food and fashion, food and ethnicity (the rise of the 'Indian' restaurant, for example), and the issues raised by 'eating out', are either ignored or treated very briefly in ways that fail to engage with the literature. The relationships between diet and health in the form of heart disease, anorexia and bulimia are not given any developed attention, and the discussion of obesity and 'slimming' fails to engage with issues of identity, fashion and self-esteem.[\(21\)](#)

This book frustrates because it deals with a neglected set of themes in what promises to be a full and authoritative way, and fails to deliver. It contains useful passages and some solid archival research, but its virtues are vitiated by a very limited critical engagement with the sources and the literature, and by a failure to look beyond the bounds and values of quantitative economic and business history. Professor Oddy has not so much pushed the appetising stuff of argument and the challenging work of cultural and anthropological historians to the side of his plate: he has implicitly rejected the recipes. We are offered a restricted menu based on traditional, unquestioning economic history, seasoned in parts with critical comment and coloured with examples, but without being confronted by the choice of options that the author advocates elsewhere. This is plain fare indeed.

August 2003

Notes

1. Stephen Reynolds, *A Poor Man's House* (London: London Magazine Editions, 1980 [1st edn, London: Macmillan, 1908]), pp. 109-10.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Chatto & Windus, 1958 [1st edn, London: Chatto & Windus, 1957]), p. 24.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970), an astonishing omission from Professor Oddy's bibliography and text.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. Elliston Allen, *British Tastes: An Enquiry into the Likes and Dislikes of the Regional Consumer* (London: Hutchinson, 1968).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See among others, Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984); idem., *Women and Families: An Oral History, 1940-1970* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); J. K. Walton, *Lancashire: A Social History 1558-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), Chapter 13; Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. K. Walton, *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class, 1870-1940* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), makes extensive use of oral history and Mass-Observation material. Professor Oddy cites this book but does not use it or build on it for these purposes.[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985); *idem.*, *et al.* (eds.), *The Sociology of Food. Eating, Diet and Culture* (London: Sage, 1992); C. Anne Wilson, *Food and Drink in Britain: from the Stone Age to Recent times* (London: Constable, 1973); *idem.* and P. C. D. Brears (eds.), *Traditional Food East and West of the Pennines* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991); Gerald and Valerie Mars (eds.), *Food, Culture and History* (London: London Food Seminar, 1993). The Oxford symposium on food and cookery has published a series of collections of essays since 1983, although some of the themes have been more directly relevant for present purposes than others.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Charles Smith, *Britain's Food Supplies. A Survey Prepared for the Fabian Society* (London: George Routledge and Sons Ltd, 1940).[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. This is a complex story. For background to this comment, Abigail Woods, *Foot and Mouth Disease in Britain: the history*, at <http://www.chstm.man.ac.uk/news/fmd.htm> [2], accessed 24 August 2003. I do not seek to associate Dr Woods with my personal interpretation of her findings.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Liz Matthews, 'The history of the ice-cream industry in Britain from its origins to 1939', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Lancaster University, 2001; Terri Colpi, *The Italian Factor: The Italian Community in Great Britain* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1991); Lucio Sponza, *Italian Immigrants in Nineteenth-century Britain: Realities and Images* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1988).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. G. Ritzer, *The McDonaldisation of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1993), and most recently, *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards and Casinos* (London: Sage, 2001).[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. T. Lobstein, *Fast Food Facts* (London: Camden, 1988).[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. See, for example, M.J. Winstanley, 'Concentration and competition in the retail sector', in M. W. Kirby and M. B. Rose (eds.), *Business Enterprise in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1994); John Benson and Gareth Shaw (eds.), *The Evolution of Retail Systems c. 1800-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992); Roger Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City: Food Supply of Manchester, 1770-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); James Schmiechen and Kenneth Carls, *The British Market Hall: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), Part Four; John K. Walton, 'Towns and consumerism', in Martin Daunt (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, III: 1840-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 715-44, and references cited there. Some of the statements on Co-operation are puzzling, especially the doubt cast in a footnote on the Co-op's pioneering role in British supermarket provision, which comes without a supporting reference.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Robb Robinson, *Trawling: The Rise and Fall of the British Trawl Fishery* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996); P. J. Atkins, 'The growth of London's railway milk trade, c. 1845-1914', *Journal of Transport History*, second series, 4 (1978), 208-226.[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Reynolds, *Poor Man's House*, pp. 110-111. For a full account of Reynolds's life and writings, see the impressive Christopher Scoble, *Fisherman's Friend: A Life of Stephen Reynolds* (Tiverton: Halsgrove, 2000).[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. I discuss these issues at length in my *Fish and Chips and the British Working Class*.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. For background on salt, Mark Kurlansky, *Salt: A World History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002).[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. For example, Diana Gittins, *Fair Sex: Family Size and Structure, 1900-1939* (London: Hutchinson, 1982); or Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, *Women, Food and Families: Power, Status, Love, Anger* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), the title of which sums up a lot of what is at issue.
20. Matthew Hilton and Martin Daunt (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. See, for example, Peter N. Stearns, *Fat History. Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Diana Simmonds, 'What's next? Fashion, foodies and the illusion

of freedom', in Alan Tomlinson (ed.), *Consumption, Identity and Style: Marketing, Meanings and the Packaging of Pleasure* (London: Comedia, 1990), pp. 121-38.[Back to \(21\)](#)

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