

Food and drink in Ireland

Launch speech, 1 June 2016

It is an honour and a privilege to have been asked to launch this path-breaking book.

The occasion is doubly significant: the volume is the first study of Irish food over the whole period of Irish history, and it is being launched on the occasion of the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, which for several years has been the pioneering vehicle in exploring Irish interest in food and food culture.

Congratulations are in order to the Royal Irish Academy, to the book's two editors Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly, and to the fourteen contributors.

Stephen Mennell's introduction puts the volume very well in the context of the study of food history. The main force in this has been French research, concerning itself with medieval and modern history. This volume, however, is more ambitious, as it goes back far in time, offering three papers on food up to the Bronze Age, three on medieval history, three on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and five on post-famine and modern times.

Generalisation is difficult in food history, because at any point in time there are many elements at play, and in addition, circumstances of individual families can contradict or qualify generalisation. Caution is warranted, in both making generalisation and even more so in too ready acceptance of past generalisation.

Some features are clear-cut, for instance archaeological evidence, shop passbooks or recipes, though Madeline Shanahan reminds us 'recipe books are theoretical inventories rather than actual ones' (p.209). However, as Regina Sexton has done using the diary of Humphrey O'Sullivan, on occasion we may be able to draw out over time the dining context of one man. Many of the nuances in diet, it might be mentioned, are captured in the diary observations of Coquebert de Montbret, French consul, who spent a long time on the road in the early 1790s, and often stayed overnight in poor cabins. By contrast, Arthur Young is sometimes quoted as an authority on Irish inns, but outside the towns he spent only five nights in roadside inns. Again caution is necessary, as there is evidence that there were good inns as well as bad inns.

Two propositions in this book are at the heart of food study; one is the importance of festive food. Not all dinners were festive, and though the evidence for non-festive days is slight, dining was sometimes simple, the more so as individual family members were often absent. In near-gentry and lower ranks of gentry families, festive food is tied up with the hunt. These somewhat idle figures hunted several days a week, and dinner followed. When the women withdrew—an English custom, by the way, not a French or Scottish one—the serious drinking began. The Brocas carton on page 250 says it all, though it does look a very wild occasion, with toasts seeming to be proposed simultaneously.

The second proposition is that in Europe at large, the general diet was basic and monotonous. The Spanish diet on the parched plain of La Mancha in the time of Cervantes was quite simply bread and cheese. Elsewhere it was a diet of two or three items, with pottage or soup being used for dunking dry hard bread. Ireland and parts of southern Europe were exceptional in European food history in embracing two exotic items in the centre of diet, potatoes and maize respectively. These foods have helped survival, but they also added a little to the complexity of the food story of these regions. The poorest country people were the labourers working in the rich cereal farming districts of Western Europe; peasants in more marginal areas had more open access to food, a point noted for Ireland by de Montbret.

Irish popular diet conformed to this frugal European fashion, and in the Irish case it was reinforced in both pre- and post-Famine years, among small and large farmers, by a remarkably high propensity to save. Elsewhere, peasants were borrowers rather than savers. This contrast is important in accounting for the modest table and conservatism of comfortable farmers.

A real service in this volume, especially in Ian Miller's paper, is the attention to tea. Basic diets lacked stimulus. That explains the impact of tea, and the fact that it was more important in the households

with the least food stimulus: slum dwellers and small holders of western lands. Edmund Burke, writing in his famous pamphlet on food scarcity in England in 1795, defended some expenditure on spirits, suggesting that people who led hard lives were entitled to some pleasure. Speaking of drink, James Kelly stresses that at the table spirits were drunk as punch. Although his point that punch was the predominant way of drinking spirits is often not appreciated, it was confirmed in a recent study in France on spirit drinking at large.

Ian Miller and Frank Amstrong have to cope with the difficult transition across the barrier of the Famine to modern Ireland. Here again we are faced with the problems of contemporary generalisation, but also with the latter-day obsession of many historians in challenging the views of Malthus, who is regarded as a pessimist: food was abundant, there was not the rising shortage that he feared. If food supply fell short, it was mainly because of failure in distribution.

Ireland is in no way unique, unless we attach uniqueness to two things, the Great Famine and the potato. The importance of the potato is overstated: it may have been somewhat unequal in regional distribution, but hunger was commonplace. Potatoes stored in clamps were often damaged in heavy winter frosts, and in many years supply ran out well before the new season's crop. The most serious consequence of the myth of the richness of the pre-famine potato diet is that it leads to the idea that the nutritional value of diets declined in post-famine times. That assumption flies in the face of the evidence.

There were solid domestic baking traditions in Ireland—richer than the historical rural baking traditions of Spain or France—and we need to know more about their early evolution. The new kitchen of the 1950s, a theme discussed in Rona Kenneally's paper, may have given baking a new emphasis. Night-time classes in the technical schools in cooking and home crafts were already a pioneering form of adult education by the 1940s.

Diet and cuisine are two different things. Diet has been influenced by transport, as evidenced by the transportation of bottled wine by trucks on roll-on, roll-off ferries, while transport and universal electricity supply created the cold chain at the end of the 1950s. I won't dwell on air transport of food, apart from noting the place it has secured for the Irish oyster and lobster in Paris.

Cooking is an art. The demands of a demanding evening for a cook can end in the sense of exhaustion and triumph, like the feast in the Danish film *Babette's Feast*. In a sense, it mirrors perfectly the exaltation of a hostess at the end of an ambitious dinner, or at the end of a hectic evening for the chef who takes his or her cooking seriously.

The cult of food and cuisine in recent times is a unique phenomenon. Compare the weekend supplements of newspapers today with these of 40 years ago. Or for that matter look at restaurants. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire uses food guides to great effect in pursuit of the elusive theme of good restaurants. I think, though, the obsession with Michelin stars is a result of change rather than a driving force in bringing it about. A Michelin one-star review meant little 40 or 50 years ago: there was no urge to seek out a restaurant with one star. As a result, the food in one-star restaurants was unassuming, relatively cheap, and unpretentious, often about the same as food in good unstarred restaurants. Today, restaurants brandish their star rating and are all too often pretentious and far from cheap. They appear to be attempting to make themselves rise to a higher level. In a middle-sized French town the best guide was and remains to avoid dining early and mid-week, to walk around and to decide to dine in the restaurant which is the most crowded.

I could say more about these things, and you will have your own views too. But thanks to this volume and the Gastronomy Symposium, we are at the beginning of an ongoing process of discovery. You should buy this volume for its information and insights. It may challenge you, and perhaps lead you to bring your own views for argument to the next Gastronomy Symposium.

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