

Neil Buttery: *A Dark History of Sugar: Pen and Sword History*, 2022: 240 pp., hardback, £20.00.

Neil Buttery introduces us to his subject with a quote from Mrs Beeton, ‘The use of sugar has increased every day and there is no household in the civilized world which can do without it.’ Mrs Beeton was writing in and of her time. Yet that craving is as old as mankind itself and goes way beyond her ‘civilized world’. The desire to seek out sweetness was lodged in the human brain long before the sugar cane took its place alongside honey and sweet seasonal fruit. The author of *A Dark History of Sugar* takes us back to that moment of innocence and from there, steadily traces sugar’s inexorable march of shame through time and space. The manufacture of sugar crystals from sugar cane guaranteed a consistent supply of sweetness; one that spread across the world. That demand was fuelled by slavery and exploitation, and the products of its success, says Neil Buttery, are racism, diabetes, rotten teeth, obesity and the maltreatment of an exhausted planet. It was sugar, in some large part, that created the British Empire – an Empire founded upon cruelty and exploitation of the people of its colonies. And, he contends, were it not for the slave trade and the money made from it, it is doubtful that the United States would ever have been as rich and as powerful as it is today.

I thought, ‘I’m in for a depressing read.’ And it is, but it’s also a book worth reading. This is a truly passionate account. And it achieves something that many strive for: a narrative that includes us all – for better or worse, we are all part of the story of sugar and must bear some degree of responsibility. Not necessarily as individuals to be held accountable for the misdemeanours of our forefathers; that is for the state to rectify. However, we have to recognize our own willingness to support a sugar industry that still exploits its workers and is destroying the earth, also those manufacturers who make their profit from the processed foods that fuel, what can only be termed, an addiction to sweetness. The pursuit of profit by promoting addiction is not new – witness the British East India Company’s single-minded (and almost single-handed) blighting of millions of Chinese lives during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by its traffic in opium. Yet it’s harder to discern when it is happening in our own time; when we find ourselves part of the society that tacitly condones similar exploitations. We are all hooked on sugar.

In the first part of the book, Buttery sets out the historical facts of its production and it makes for uncomfortable reading – there’s no ‘sugaring the pill’ here; in the second, he tells the sugar story again, though now from the point of view of its consumption. He takes us from a time of innocence to the abolition of slavery; he traces the development of the ‘sweet tooth’ from status symbol amongst the ruling classes to its steady permeation through the whole of society. In Britain, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, afternoon tea became ritualized by an aspirational middle class. When tea

became cheap enough for the working classes to buy too, its consumption was viewed as a step forward. Tea from India and China was rapidly replacing ale as the standard working man's beverage, and to make tea, water must be boiled, thus greatly reducing the risk of water-related diseases. The lower classes drank their tea with milk and sugar and soon became addicted to that regular 'fix' of sweetness that the 'cuppa' provided.

With the Industrial Revolution came the industrialization of food, much of which was now produced in the factory, the birth place of 'junk food'. And it has continued. Clearly, Neil Buttery would have preferred to have ended his story on a positive note – as he says, he would like to write with words of hope about a 'brighter future'. He doesn't quite manage this, having little faith in big business changing its ways. What he does achieve though, through this very readable book, is to present his readers with a moral certainty: each of us can change or modify our own consumption of the sweet stuff. If we do, not only will our health improve, but in so doing we broadcast the message that we want ethically and environmentally sustainable ways of producing, and using, sugar now and in the future; that the days of exploiting others and being ourselves exploited could be over.

DI MURRELL

Gillian Riley had been working for some time on a review of three books about seventeenth-century Neapolitan cooking when I contacted her with the news that one of them, Astarita's translation of Antonio Latini's *Lo Scalco alla Moderna*, was available from the remainder bookseller Postscript <<https://www.psbooks.co.uk>> for the bargain price of £14.99 – a fair reduction from £104. Unfortunately events have so fallen that Gillian was unable to complete her review in time for this issue but I give you a mere smidgeon of it so that you may take advantage of Postscript's offer before they run out of copies. The important take-away if that Ms Riley approves. The books in question are:

Tommaso Astarita: *The Italian Baroque Table, cooking and entertaining from the Golden Age of Naples*: ACMRS Tempe, Arizona, 2014: 308 pp., hardback, originally priced at £55, but currently available from Book Depository for £12.06.

Tommaso Asterita, ed. and trans.: *Antonio Latini's 'The Modern Steward, or the Art of preparing banquets well'. A complete English translation*: ARC Humanities Press, Leeds, 2019: 444 pp., hardback, was £104, but currently available at £14.99 from Postscript.

Antonio Latini: *Lo Scalco alla Moderna*: 2 volumes, Naples, 1692–1694: facsimile edition, from the copy in Harlan and Delia Walker's library, Bibliotheca Culinaria, Lodi, 1993: 606 and 256 pp., currently only available secondhand. Lovers of Italian food will enjoy all four of these books from which two heroes