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with the harvesting and the pressing of olives in a similarly unassuming and satisfying manner. Illustrated throughout by the author's highly recognizable and thoroughly enjoyable pen and ink drawings one is struck by the author's considerable ability to capture unlikely forms with both word and line.

Matt Lord

Carolyn Steel: *Hungry City*: originally published by Chatto and Windus, 2008; now Vintage, 2013: 383 pp., paperback £14.99;

Sitopia: How Food Can Save the World: Chatto and Windus, 2020: 373 pp., hardback, £16.99; or Vintage, 2021, paperback, £9.99.

Possibly a little late in the day to be reviewing a book written as long ago as 2008, but Carolyn Steel's *Hungry City* is something of a prequel to her second book *Sitopia*. Although both books are essentially standalone chronicles, *Hungry City* sets out to explore the notion of how a city feeds itself and the problems this incurs, while Steel's new book *Sitopia* builds upon those initial thoughts, extends her arguments and offers some solutions.

Although the two are weighty volumes – both running to nigh-on 400 pages – Steel's style is flowing, easy to read, non-academic. She writes with a light touch and a certain wry humour.

I met Carolyn Steel in 2019 at the Oxford Symposium for Food and Cookery. Hers was the keynote talk on the chosen subject for that year: Food and Power. Her title: 'A Tale of Two Cities: Paris, London and the Political Power of Food'. In a crowded auditorium she asked her audience, 'Who knows what is essential to a city in order for it to survive, grow and to, ultimately, become great?' Of all the responses mine was the only correct one – 'It has to be beside a navigable river.' Why? Because, historically, only water transport could provide an ergonomically viable system that allowed food, in sufficient quantity, to be delivered to a city on a regular basis. As Steel points out,

London and Paris are classic examples. Once, in both cases, grain and other produce was regularly shipped down river from the rich agricultural hinterlands inland or brought from around the coast by sea. For London, it is the Thames that has, traditionally, provided the inland route and which also gives access to the sea, to the European mainland and, ultimately, the world. Even today the bulk of our food arrives by ship with thousands of tonnes of foreign grain regularly discharged at London Gateway – the port of London at Tilbury.

I knew all this because in 2017 I, too, had written a book on this very subject, so was able to proceed swiftly to the top of the class. I had not heard of Carolyn Steel or of *Hungry City* when I was writing my own; probably just as well as I might have found its impressive range and depth disheartening in comparison to my own small effort. In fact, while *Hungry City* does explore the antecedents required to turn a small settlement into a great metropolis, as does mine, Steel's book goes way beyond this. In *Hungry City* this is simply the historical landscape from which she sets out to show how modern food production and consumption shapes our lives and environment. How today the urban lifestyle has become so far removed from that of the countryside, from farming and agriculture, that we give little thought to how our food is produced. True, we do still have to shop for it, but in this, we tend to be more preoccupied with how it will taste, its cost and quality; objective consideration as to where or how the food is grown or concerns about the welfare of the animals that we eat are not, generally, to the fore of our thoughts.

Hungry City is about how food conditions our lives far more powerfully than we might imagine: our bodies, habits, homes, cities, landscapes, economics, politics, even the way we think, are all shaped by our need for food. Steel writes, 'food is without question the most powerful force shaping our world. One might have thought, therefore, that we would value it and treat it with respect. Yet in the industrial world today, we expect food to be cheap, paying less for it than at any time in history and wasting up to half of what we produce.' This extraordinary state of affairs, she contends, is the result of a series of political, economic and cultural decisions stretching back more than a century that, together with industrialization, has created the illusion of cheap food by choosing not to incorporate the true costs of its production within its pricing structure. Climate change, mass extinction, deforestation, water depletion, soil degradation, pollution and diet-related disease are but a few of these costs.

The relationship between food and cities is a huge subject and, uniquely perhaps, one she considers from the perspective of an architect rather than food historian or social scientist. She sees the city with an architect's forensic eye: its structure; growth; infrastructure. She points out that this is the most self-evident of observations: that food shapes our cities, that both are fundamental to all of our lives, yet the connection between the two is almost too big to

see. Once stated, though, it is hard to understand how the link between the two could ever be missed. It was only when I was writing my own book that I began to fully comprehend how those who had first migrated to cities could only do so by giving up their birthright: the land upon which they could grow their own food. Once one was a resident in a city, it was the reliance upon third parties to supply the nourishment required to stay alive that was the real game-changer. When city dwellers came to depend upon others for their nourishment then governance of the city must be predicated upon the ability to organize, control and protect a system that would ensure a consistent supply, to its citizens, of their daily bread. It is in order to protect that dependency that taxes are imposed, land is reformed, deals are struck, embargoes issued and wars are fought.

Steel explains how initially *Hungry City* was an attempt to describe just one city – London – but that she quickly realized that London was no more than an exemplar of the connections that all cities have with food. *Hungry City* then is more about a way of seeing things than a description of just one urban metropolis. In her study of London, she draws on themes that are global in reach, tracing the critical path of urban civilization through food, both historically and geographically. Her book follows food's journey from land and sea to the city – through markets and supermarkets to kitchen and eventually the table and thereafter as waste product. Each chapter deals in turn with farming, food transport, shopping, cooking, eating and refuse. She questions how each element affects our lives and ultimately impacts upon the planet.

She thinks the Malthusian prediction is still alive: population must not outstrip the supply of basic food available. Since human populations increase geometrically while agricultural output only does so arithmetically it is only a matter of time before mankind runs out of available land, and therefore food. So far monocultural grain production fuelled by artificial fertilizer has prevented mass starvation but, even so, both China and India have adopted population limiting policies. She states succinctly that, 'the tearing up of rain forests and dumping chemicals in the ground only postpone the Malthusian question - it has not gone away.'

Luckily for us, by now utterly overwhelmed by the apparent hopelessness of it all, Steel says that there is an obvious solution: we need to start valuing food again - by recognizing its true cost and to start paying accordingly.

Sitopia envisages the possibility of a changed world. Steel takes as her starting point that, in the face of the hustle and bustle of daily life, we seem to have forgotten to ask, 'What makes for a good life?' She believes that food and the security of its supply lies at the very root of the question and it is in this context, she proposes, that the seemingly disparate disciplines of technology and philosophy must be brought together to give us the answer.

As with *Hungry City*, *Sitopia* is organized into seven chapters starting

with food itself, then moves to considering the body, home, society, city and country, nature and time. She examines the current state of affairs and asks how they might be improved. She stresses too that *Sitopia* is not primarily about food *per se* but rather how thinking about our relationship to food can help us address our many modern dilemmas in a positive way.

Essentially, it seems to me, Carolyn Steel's argument is a simple one – happiness: the very essence of a good life – is about a return to the basic tenets of humanity: compassion, tolerance, generosity; with space in our lives for ritual and relationships; living in the present and within our means; being engaged with 'now'. She believes that it is by having a healthier relationship with food that all of those parameters by which we frame our lives can be reset.

The important step then, for humankind, is to decide which of the two dominant food philosophies it wants to support. On the one hand there is the position of the industrial agrarian who argues that, in order to feed the world, we need to further accelerate our mastery of nature, using more, rather than less fertilizers and pesticides, to continue genetically modifying plants and animals and increasing the efficiency of production in the industrial food-chain, and on the other, there is the organic food lobby. This group argues we must move away from what it sees as the catastrophic consequences of industrial agriculture to rediscovering ways of conjoining with the natural world, concentrating on building greater diversity, complexity and resilience into the eco-systems that feed us. Essentially, says Steel, we have to decide on where we, the human race, stands in relation to nature.

She contends that the true meaning of *Sitopia* (*sitos*: food; *topos*: place): a world shaped by food, is that it is through our understanding of food that we come to understand what it means to be human and how to co-exist with our fellow humans and non-humans in both time and place. Throughout millennia, food has shaped our bodies, our lifestyles, our politics and our landscapes. From decisions about what one is going to eat today to deliberations on the worldwide control of industrial food production, it is food that touches every part of our existence.

In these two books, Carolyn Steel sets out the nature of the problem as she sees it and urges a total re-evaluation of our relationship to food. She suggests that by learning, once again, to properly value food, it will also act as the pointer to more fulfilling and sustainable ways of living. Do this, she believes, and happiness will follow.

Di Murrell

Barbara English and Kloskk Tyrer: *Foods, Feasts and Festivals: Beverley and the East Riding*: Beverley and District Civic Society, 2021: 76 pp., paperback, £10.00, available from Beverley Guildhall or to order from the Beverley Civic Society website (contact page).