

Heather Hiestand: *The Marquess of Cake*: Kensington Trade, 2013; 252 pp., paperback, £11.87.

Bridgerton meets Betty's. With trifle. Set in nineteenth-century England, head of the Redcake family, Bartley Redcake, has made a fortune in industry in Victorian Britain, and the jewel in the crown of his newly acquired possessions is his Tea Shop and Emporium in London. Married to Ellen and with three adult children and a son, at the beginning of the book, he is readying himself and his family for the ceremony to receive his knighthood. Sir Bartley's plan is to uproot his family and move to the countryside, but eldest daughter Alys, whose cake-decorating skills and menu ideas such as Scotch trifle have been instrumental in building the reputation of Redcake's Tea Shop, objects to being 'ordered into the country like some ornament for a hunting ball'.

On the day of the investiture, Alys has a brief but emotionally and physically charged encounter with eligible bachelor Michael Shield, Marquess of Hatbrook. The Marquess calls in to Redcake's Tea Shop, to satisfy the sweet cravings and shaking hands, which manifest themselves so frequently. We are expected to wonder at what this puzzling medical mystery might be, but since it's mentioned on page two, there's little build-up of suspense.

And so the scene is set for exploring the romance between headstrong Alys wanting to break away from the control of her family and the desirable Marquess. Fair warning, some scenes in the narrative get fairly explicit at times, which sits oddly in the traditionally prim Victorian setting.

However, it is the food references which I found most distracting, but not in a way one might expect. Instead of being enchanted at the line 'She smelled like cake', I was left wondering: Which cake? Maderia? Plum? Seed?? Similarly the unavailability of the Scotch Trifle, purportedly a favourite of the Queen, because the Tea Shop's entire stock has been sent to Buckingham Palace for a celebration had me pondering whether this was really credible. Despite employing an army of chefs confectioners, the Queen 'sent out' for trifle?

The story appears to be more focused on the romance, rather than the bakery/Tea Room setting. At times, the food references seem rather forced, and lack the detail of appearance, flavours and tastes that might be of interest to the foodie fiction fan. Since the book opens in 1886, the notion of a popular and fully-fledged Tea Room is a little early, the 'cokies' appear to be a nineteenth-century imagining of the 1920s 'Nippy', the customers men when they were traditionally mostly women, etc.

*The Marquess of Cake* is merely the first book in the seven volume Redcake series. For those that enjoy period romances, this and presumably the rest of the series, supplies a pleasant-enough diversion, clunky plot points notwithstanding, but fans of historical food may find the vagueness and lack of details frustrating and might like to seek out Dr Annie Gray's *The Greedy Queen* for a more informed read on Victorian food.

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