PPC 120 (2021) 117-119
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.27833
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

BOOK REVIEWS

Paul-Henry Bizon: *La Louve*: Gallimard, 2017: 248 pp., paperback, €20.00.
I was alerted to the existence of this novel by a reference in some paper about organics and modern food tendencies that was offered to the Oxford Symposium. I had never heard of it and report it here for two half-good reasons. The first is that you will spend an enjoyable evening (perhaps enjoyable is the wrong word, but you will smile); the second is that if you are not absolutely up to speed with the French food scene in 2017, this will give you some helpful background. If you are up to speed, it may make you cringe (just as Houellebecq's latest had me cringing). The style is by-and-large Mills & Boon and, of course, there is a happy ending. The facts centre on the establishment of an organic growers' co-operative in the Vendée masterminded by the afflicted (emotionally, that is) peasant *redivivus* Camille Vollot and his plucky, and spectacularly beautiful, wife Victoire. This co-op becomes enmeshed in the definitely murky schemes of the villain Raoul Sarkis who is intent on creating an Eataly-style food hall such as has been pioneered by Oscar Farinetti in collaboration with Slow Food in Turin, Milan and further afield. For background, there is plenty on marketing organics, agroforestry and permaculture, as well as the Paris restaurant scene, *Le Fooding*, bistronomy and Parisians' preoccupation with restaurants. It's knockabout, badly written and great fun.

Mary F. Williamson: *Mrs Dalgairns's Kitchen: Rediscovering 'The Practice of Cookery'*: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021: 608 pp., hardback, £28.50.
In 1829, Catherine Dalgairns compiled *The Practice of Cookery Adapted to the Business of Everyday Life*, a stylistically unornamented repository of more than 1400 reliable recipes that garnered favourable notices upon publication. *The Practice of Cookery* sold well and enjoyed a number of evolving editions until 1861. Eventually however the book drifted into obscurity, a neglect Mary F. Williamson intends to rectify with *Mrs Dalgairn's Kitchen: Rediscovering 'The Practice of Cookery'*. It highlights an overlooked classic that should appeal to the general reader and so should the selection from the book of original recipes modified by Elizabeth Baird for twenty-first-century cooks. Williamson provides a sound description of the early nineteenth-century Anglophone kitchen and its implements before reproducing the text itself, altering the original spellings in conformity with twenty-first-century norms, another apparent attempt to entice the general reader. In her uneven introduction Williamson traces the history of its drafting and publication. 'The saga,' as she asserts, 'sheds invaluable light on the highly personal and flexible world of early nineteenth-century publishing in Britain.'

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023, Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row, Sheffield, S1 2BX
equinoxonline

Williamson is a lifelong advocate for historical Canadian cooking, an unjustly under-reported topic. She discovered some years ago that Mrs Dalgairns lived on Prince Edward Island before emigrating with her Scots husband to Britain where, following a serial string of financial failures, they wound up in Dundee. Notwithstanding her early years in North America, *The Practice of Cookery* was published there and always has been considered a Scots cookbook.

Williamson speculates that the peoples who have populated Prince Edward Island as its history unfolds inform the work of Mrs Dalgairns, and argues that her recipes 'were drawn from a wider sphere of international cookery than is found in the cookbooks of her English-speaking contemporaries – only Catherine Dalgairns brought to her successful authorship a diverse background, having experienced a wide variety of culinary traditions.'

Among them Williamson includes 'Mi'kmaq, Acadian, Scottish, and, to a lesser extent, English,' as well as American, French (with reference to the Scots' 'Auld Alliance'), Irish and Raj influences. It is difficult to find support for the claim. The British had deported the majority of Acadians decades before Mrs Dalgairns was born and, as Peter Brears has argued, the culinary myth of an Auld Alliance gets scant support from the historical record. As Williamson herself concedes, 'it is impossible to know whether the presence of the Mi'kmaq people … exerted an Indigenous influence on food choices and cooking.'

Mrs Dalgairns' production is a characteristically British cookbook of its time, and the recipes themselves reflect the conclusion that her culinary influences were essentially the same as those of her contemporaries. None of her recipes displays anything unique to Acadian or Mi'kmaq cooking. It is not for nothing that, as Williamson herself notes, 'reviewers of *The Practice of Cookery* seem not to have picked up on the wide-ranging geographical and ethnic sources of her recipes.'

Most other British cookbooks of the period are also replete with dishes described as originating variously in the Netherlands, France, India, Spain, sometimes even Turkey and other 'exotic' locations whether or not they actually arose there, and whether or not their authors had actual contact with those sources. It is tempting to agree with the anonymous author of a Dalgairns profile online that her 'Canadian association is tenuous… and mostly an accident of birth' rather than someone with '[t]he strong "Canadian" connection' that Williamson claims for her (quotation of 'Canadian' in original). At one point Williamson also appears to consider *The Practice of Cookery* a cosmopolitan artefact of Scotland; elsewhere she insists it is no such thing, but those contemporaneous reviewers disagreed. One English assessment, which Williamson would debunk on the basis that Mrs Dalgairns spent only a few years in Dundee, complained that she 'exhibits too palpable an addiction to Scots dishes.'

equinoxonline

Mrs Dalgairns touted the fact that none of the recipes in *The Practice of Cookery* is new. Instead, she promoted the book with the claim that she or acquaintances had simplified, improved and tested existing instructions. 'An original book of cookery,' she reasoned, 'would neither meet with, nor deserve, much attention; because what is intended in this matter is not receipts for new dishes but clear instructions how to make those already established in public favour.' One of the reviewers quoted that passage with approval, to concur that her 'reasoning is very just, for none but the most thankless of *gourmands*… would sit down and weep for new worlds of luxury.' Except, of course, that we did and we do. Still, those descriptions of the book are accurate enough, and fair as far as they go. They also render *The Practice of Cookery* less interesting as a cultural marker than original efforts from the likes of Christian Isobel Johnstone or Dr Kitchiner.

Williamson treads firmer ground in admiring the tone of the text. It does, as she contends, disclose a discernible personality. It is brisk and businesslike, uninhibited about dispensing advice, some of it unimpeachably sound: 'Vegetables are always best when newly gathered, and should be brought in from the garden early in the morning; they will then have a fragrant freshness, which they lose by keeping.' On the universally tricky process of producing pastry: 'Puff paste, if good, will rise into blisters in the course of rolling it out; it may be made with three quarters of a pound of butter to one of flour; the flour should be dried, and is the better for being sifted.'

British empiricism informs *The Practice of Cookery*, in a way most helpful to the cook. In an era before the invention of the thermostat, perform a test: 'To ascertain if the oven be of a proper heat, a little bit of paste may be baked in it, before anything else be put in.' And so forth throughout. Mrs Dalgairns gave the less-than-confident cooks she targeted recipes that remained popular for over three decades until, Williamson believes, the onslaught that was Mrs Beeton swept all before her. The attraction of attention to this under-appreciated author is most welcome.

Blake Perkins

Susan Weingarten: *Haroset: A Taste of Jewish History*: Toby Press, 2019: 192 pp., hardback, £18.99.

Haroset traces the origins and development of this symbolic Passover food. *Haroset* is a paste of fruits, nuts and spices, perhaps originating as a Greek dipping sauce to counteract bitter herbs such as lettuce and endives. From Talmudic commentaries and the Graeco-Roman world, to the medieval and early modern Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions, through to the myriad modern recipes, Susan Weingarten's book is overflowing with detail. As she explores the mysteries and contradictions of *haroset*, Weingarten captures the rich diversity of Jewish life.