PPC 115 (2019) 120-121
https://doi.org/10.1558/ppc.27910
Petits Propos Culinaires (print) ISSN 0142-7857
Petits Propos Culinaires (online) ISSN 3029-0651

BOOK REVIEWS

Alison Locker: *Freshwater Fish in England. A Social and Cultural History of Coarse Fish from Prehistory to the Present Day*: Oxbow Books, 2018: 156 pp., paperback, £38.00.

The best books tell you things you ought to have known, have forgotten, have slipped the mind, as well as offering material that you would never have thought about in a million years. Alison Locker's is a best book. The author's speciality is fish bones: analysing the spoil sieved from archaeological deposits to see what sort of thing our ancestors were eating. Allied to this microscopic inspection, techniques of isotopic analysis of human skeletons to see what proportion of their diet was fish, meat or otherwise based, have meant that we have a more nuanced view of prehistoric and more recent foodways (earlier archaeological sites, for instance, were not subject to any form of sieving, thus tiny fish bones were overlooked). But her book is not all about digs and early man, nor just about eating freshwater fish, but ends with a long account of angling (when we had long since given up the idea of a tasty chub dinner). It is full of nice points: from the relative aversion of pre-Romano-British populations to fish as food (perhaps sometimes connected to taboos), the importance of status and display in the Roman adoption of fishponds and all that apparatus of convenience in supply, the role of the Church in medieval fish consumption, the 'privatization' of freshwater fish supply by our medieval hunting nobility, the intrusion into the fish market of sea fish with improved means of transport and preservation, and the great expansion of coarse fishing as a working-class pastime. This last, increasingly, had nothing to do with the table and everything to do with the weighing scales and taxidermist. It will be the book to turn to.

Brenda Assael: *The London Restaurant, 1840–1910*: Oxford University Press, 2019: 244 pp., hardback, £65.00.

There is a great deal to admire in this short book, not least the author's close attention to a wide range of sources, most especially the trade press for the period in question. She has been well served by various London libraries (Guildhall, Bishopsgate, etc.) but should not be denied credit for unearthing some scrumptious cuttings about restaurant economics, staff, hygiene and myriad other topics. She stresses that her book is not a contribution to the history of food, but nonetheless it can't help being that, even if but tangentially. There are good chapters and bad: the best are those to do with names and descriptions of eating houses (chophouses, taverns, dining rooms, cafés, and so on), with waiters and waitresses and with health and regulation. Her chapter 'Running the Restaurant' is also rich in anecdote. Less good are the chapters

'Gastro-Cosmopolitanism' and 'Dining in the Restaurant' when she falls victim to tedious theorizing by fellow historians as she searches for larger points or justifications (the growth of London as a world city, gender roles, the world of work) most of which we have known about for too, too long and don't need instruction in. I wished she could have spent more time on defining the term 'restaurant' as she observes that in 1890, of the 1,659 establishments listed in Kelly's *Directory*, only 92 were primarily classified as restaurants. So that the restaurant, *proprement dit*, was actually a rare bird, is not really explored. She does, however, give us some good material about the growth of chains (the acme of which was to be Lyons) and many enticing anecdotes about the little places that serviced the worker. Her reports of waiters and waitresses are endlessly enjoyable. Although her reading of the press cuttings is exemplary, I was surprised that she had not found more material from memoirs of those in the trade. She uses Mario of the Caprice's, as well as Albert Thomas's (he ended up as butler in chief at Brasenose College and wrote *Wait and See* in 1944), but there are perhaps others whose working lives fell within her date range. But this is to cavil: there is much here to enlighten the wealthy reader (who is paying 26p per printed page, and there's no VAT on books).

Rebecca Earle: *Potato*: Bloomsbury, 2019: 107 pp., paperback, £9.99.
Potato is one of almost 50 in Bloomsbury's quirky Object Lessons series of 'beautifully produced' – and for once the publisher's hype is justified – small books 'about the hidden lives of ordinary things', ranging from natural phenomena such as trees and earth to modern innovations such as the remote control, drone and hashtag. At around 100 pages, the books are characterized by their conciseness and, if *Potato* is typical, also by a creative re-thinking of the subject that begins with a reflection on a photograph of a potato and proceeds, via the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Pablo Neruda and the early history of the potato, to consideration of the role of the potato in political economy, statecraft and the achievement of the utopian goal of health and happiness for all. Potatoes have always been a humble food, Rebecca Earle argues, suggesting that peasants rather than noblemen or gentleman farmers were the first to adopt this new crop in Europe. Nowhere were they more important to peasants than in Ireland, and Earle succeeds admirably in summarizing the causes and consequences of the Irish potato famine of the mid-nineteenth century in relatively few words (over about two small pages). 'Potatoes are part of how we understand famine', she concludes. The story is told in a brisk, sparkling style with comprehensive endnotes and well chosen (but poorly reproduced) illustrations, and concludes with a personal (and, in my opinion, less relevant) account based on family histories and recipes. It undoubtedly deserves to be described as 'a good and satisfying read' but I also wondered if it were also symptomatic of a shift that seems to have been taking