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BOOK REVIEWS

Bee Wilson: *First Bite: How we learn to eat*: Fourth Estate, 2015: 432 pp., paperback, £12.99.

Given its sub-title, 'How we learn to eat', Bee Willson's latest book seems, at first sight, as following naturally from her previous books (e.g. *Consider the Fork*, *The Hive*) which focus on the history of various aspects of our food culture. And history is her background, having studied the history of ideas at university. But, as she says herself, this book took her in a different direction away from the past as history to our personal memories of eating.

Her focus is on how we eat, and in particular how we learn to eat, rather than just concentrating on what we eat. The latter approach offers advice and admonitions, perhaps necessary given the crisis facing most people's diets in this country, influenced heavily by the food industry towards sugar, salt and fat. But information and coercion don't seem to work. Wilson suggests, convincingly, that, to develop healthier and more enjoyable eating habits we should instead look at how we learn to eat, rather than assume that our tastes are innate.

She uses different aspects of our learning experience to develop this theme, for example, in her first chapter by looking at how we develop our taste for particular foods. Many people claim that their dietary preferences are fixed, innate or genetic: 'You'd never get me to like sultanas/squid/salami [delete as appropriate].' Wilson draws on a range of a academic research demonstrating that 'the evidence for tastes being heritable is very modest, accounting for only around 20% – at most – of the variation in foods eaten.'

If that is the case, where do we get our tastes from? I felt that her second chapter on memory was perhaps the most significant in answering this. It is here that Wilson makes what I consider a distinctive contribution to contemporary discourses on diets and eating: she introduces aspects of psychology and our emotions – how we feel about food – something that has been notably missing from even the best writing on the subject.

If we *learn* to eat then what we ate as children is going to be significant; as with other aspects of learning, we are likely to have learnt most from meals we had when we were young. And if those foods are associated with particular emotions they are going to influence how we feel about them even now. 'Memory is the single most powerful driving force in how we learn to eat; it shapes all our yearnings. ... I bet you can recall the habitual meals of childhood: the breakfast you were given for a weekend treat and the way bread tasted in your house. These are the memories that still have emotional force years or even decades later.'

Reading this got me reflecting on my own childhood tastes and how they have influenced my current habits. I remember a comforting treat for Sunday tea was scrambled egg sandwiches and being allowed to eat them in the living

room. And I notice that if I want something comforting to eat today I will revert to those scrambled egg sandwiches of my childhood, and make them for my children. This is almost as much about the emotion as the food itself.

But memories can be destructive as well; if the only comfort a child got in an unhappy household was that of a sweet or salty 'treat', then they may desperately hold on to that food choice into adulthood as a false comfort, instilling perhaps unhealthy eating habits.

Wilson takes this further in later chapters, demonstrating that we can change how we eat and re-learn better eating habits. She discusses various techniques for individuals and policy interventions at a political level, some of which have been very successful, e.g. the 'Sapere' movement in Scandinavia, whilst others have been more patchy i.e. Baby-Led Weaning.

The significant point here is the need for us to think about how we have learnt to eat what we currently eat and how we have been able to change our eating habits. So, reflecting on how my own food tastes have changed or been re-learnt, I remembered how we used to get fish and chips for supper on the way back from Scouts on a Friday evening when I was a teenager. For a long time I considered this something a bit special and enjoyable. Until, that is, a few years ago. I was on my way home late one evening and thought I would treat myself to fish and chips. The first few bites were pleasant enough but fairly soon I felt a little nauseous and just couldn't finish it. I have been lucky – my upbringing and food environment as I grew up meant that my tastes had developed since teenage years away from a yearning for fatty and salty food.

It is this combination of the academic and personal that distinguishes Bee Wilson's book from the writings of other food commentators, such as Michael Pollan, whom she admires. She talks candidly about her own experiences with eating; right at the start she writes, 'I managed to make myself pretty miserable about eating for the best part of a decade'. Later on, she talks about the difficulties and struggles about food she has had with her own children. But these reflections are not to get our sympathy. Rather, they sensibly demonstrate that developing a more healthy relationship with our food is not easy, particularly given the unhelpful food environment we live with. And they nudge us to look at where we got our own tastes from and how, by thinking about these, we can get to a better place. This is the difference between the didactic ('teacher-tell') approach to learning used in so much food advice, and the experiential approach that Wilson uses, engaging our emotions and senses, which after all should be what eating is about. My only slight regret is that her Epilogue does look like a list of advice, when perhaps she should have just told us to go away and reflect on what we eat and why. But such a small point in no way takes away from the refreshingly new insights Wilson offers us in this book – it is up to us to digest them.

Tim Harris