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SUPERSTORES

An ever-present discourse seems currently to be the woes of our supermarket giants. And if the theme should change then what we hear is how dire is their dominance. Much though we may loath them, perhaps we should accept that their existence is merely another iteration of our search for convenient shopping. A weekly market, or a seasonal fair, were medieval solutions to domestic supply, to be superseded by permanent retailers in urban settings come the dawning of the modern era. What is a small town centre but a supermarket in multiple ownership? For my part, I find it preferable, but it lacks a certain convenience and, depending on the town and the parties involved, may even lack competence. One is minded, in our prejudice against the likes of Tesco, of how it must have felt to a small haberdasher to witness the rise of the department store – and who now would object to their existence? A pressing need, if the High Street is to fight back against the supermarket – or so it seems to me – is to weatherproof our town centres, to remove traffic from them, and to facilitate means of payment, as well as to protect the small trader from excessive demands of rent and rates. For me, the most depressing aspect of modern life is our insistence on movement. We travel at the drop of a hat, whether to go shopping in an out-of-town setting or to board a train for entirely frivolous reasons. And this tendency is reinforced by hopeless town-planning. Our aim should be to concentrate, concentrate.

LONDON AND THE WIDER NATION

Following the tremendous excitement of the Scottish referendum and the discussions it ignited concerning the nature and identity of Britain, it was amusing to take a trip to London – often proposed as another candidate for independence. If we were anxious to promote solidarity between the regions of England, London shows us how not to proceed. I wished to board a bus, it was impossible to pay with legal tender. I had to buy an Oyster Card. Were I to want to traverse the Thames via the Dartford Crossing, I could not do so without registering online or paying by smart phone. Legal tender is not welcome. Should I bring my car to London, I have to pay a congestion charge. It took me an hour to work out how to effect this the first time I tried. London is another country. It does not work to our rules. You have to be an adept to survive. If provincials cannot visit their capital city without preliminary training, what does that say about national unity?

VEGETARIANS

I have been having difficulties with some aspects of vegetarianism. As the world's population reaches new heights, what is the vegetarian's response to the inevitable competition humanity has entered into with the rest of

creation for the use of land for food production, however ethical? It strikes me that vegetarians are going to be as species triumphalist as any carnivore. All intruders on agricultural land will face exclusion, there will be no room for co-existence.

THE SOIL ASSOCIATION

The news of the resignation of Joanna Blythman, Lynda Brown, Andrew Whitley and Pat Thomas as trustees of the Soil Association has caused a certain stir among followers of the organic way. Their criticisms are on a broad front but stem from the Association's recent policy of engagement with a wider world than merely 'organic' in order, it thinks, to increase its relevance to farming, food manufacture and society in general. Hence it has recruited to its management committee a farmer who is not registered organic, as well as a doctor who pours scorn on homeopathy (a necessary veterinary weapon for organic farmers, think of it what you will, as so many allopathic remedies are forbidden them). Hence, too, it's endorsement of various 'kite marks' such as Food for Life and Catering Mark which involve a proportion of organic ingredients, but not to the exclusion of all else. Such activities, its critics suggest, have weakened the core message of organic agriculture and diluted the power of the SA as a spokesman for and advocate of organics. Argument and rebuttal may be found here <http://www.theecologist.org/blogs_and_comments/commentators/2658710/soil_association_must_get_back_to_its_roots.html> and here <http://www.theecologist.org/campaigning/2659896/the_soil_associations_mission_is_organic_and_it_always_will_be.html>

CANAL WOMEN

There is something about life on narrow boats and canals that stirs the heart of the most cynical. The reception of Di Murrell's pieces in previous issues only serves to underline the fact. She has sent me the web address of a short film called *Idle Women & Judies* by Heather Wastie, posted by the Canal & River Trust. It eloquently celebrates the wartime service of women on the canals. Sheer bliss: <http://www.canalworld.net/forums/index.php?showtopic=71415&hl=>

MANNA COMMUNITY KITCHEN, LIVERPOOL

I have been in correspondence with Dr Bryce Evans, Senior Lecturer in History at Liverpool Hope University, one of the founders of this venture. The Kitchen's take on food poverty is constructive. I shall quote: 'Manna Community Kitchen is not a soup kitchen and it's not a food bank. While both these models help to combat food poverty in the UK they are imperfect. The stigma of the "hand out" is attached to both. Moreover, when it comes

to food banks in particular, the food rarely, if ever, consists of fresh fruit and vegetables: the essential components of healthy diet and nutritional wellbeing. A further problem with current food poverty initiatives in the UK is that they do not tackle the "hidden" yet highly significant issue of mental illness and social isolation. Food banks operate on the basis of submitting a ticket (received from a GP or job centre) and receiving a food package in return. A key component of mental wellbeing is social interaction, which is frequently all but absent. The stigma surrounding food bank use means that many recipients testify to feeling "ashamed", forcing them to leave the centre promptly on receiving their food. This allows for little opportunity for following up on the welfare of the individuals availing of the service. This only perpetuates negativity and makes finding a long term solution difficult. There are very rarely cafés, kitchens or social areas attached to food banks; such simple provision would create a more relaxed and informal environment which would assist in putting recipients at ease. The idea of a community kitchen, by contrast to the food bank, centres on the concept of *communal* eating. Community does not have to be static; it can be mobile, as in the case of Manna Community Kitchen. Manna Community Kitchen's volunteers travel to old people's homes; church groups; youth theatres; community centres – anywhere where people gather collectively – to dish out hearty and nutritious food at very low prices. A bowl of freshly prepared vegetable soup and a crusty roll costs £1 so is widely affordable. Most importantly, however, this model allows people to come *together* to dine collectively. Sitting down to eat and chat is a simple but catalytic solution, and its implications for social cohesion, friendliness, happiness and wellbeing are far-reaching indeed. Working in partnership with local businesses, charities, church groups and community centres, Manna Community Kitchen creates simple yet lasting and sustainable solutions to poverty, hunger and social injustice.'

This statement seems to me apposite. Dr Evans was also awarded a Churchill Travelling Fellowship in 2014 to visit Peru's community kitchens – the most extensive network in the world – and his instructive report may be found here: <http://www.wcmt.org.uk/fellows/reports/community-kitchens-genesis-and-history-delivery> His contention that the food bank model does not go far enough in tackling the manifold aspects of food poverty is worth broadcasting, if only because it proclaims the centrality of cookery and commensality.

OXFORD SYMPOSIUM 2015

This year's Symposium takes place at St Catherine's College, Oxford on 3–5 July. Its topic is Food and Communication. A call for papers has been made, to be submitted by 15 January. I apologize if my late running has caused any of you to miss this deadline. The web address where you will find all materials necessary for registration and discovery is <http://www.oxfordsymposium.org.

uk/> As is normally the case, the term 'communication' is to be interpreted at its widest: 'methods of transmitting information about all aspects of food production, preparation, presentation and consumption from the earliest times to the latest – from painted prey-animals on the walls of the Lascaux caves to the byways of Wikipedia.' The website also gives much information about possible bursaries. With the cost of an all-inclusive package now touching £400, this may not be irrelevant. The organizer, Priscilla White, sent me this memorandum about the Symposium's grants: 'The Student Grant Programme has been augmented this year. There are now five student grants worth £500 each for students whose papers are accepted, to assist with research and other costs. Additionally, three students whose presentations at the Symposium itself are the most dynamic will each receive a £200 presentation award. Meanwhile, don't forget: we offer reduced price places for students who attend – up to 30 students this year – whether or not they present a paper; the highly successful Young Chef's Grant is available again this year: applications by 1 May.'

IRISH FOOD STUDIES

My late running may also give cause for irritation to another group of scholars and enthusiasts for Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire has sent me this call for papers (with a 1 February deadline) on behalf of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* which is organizing a special issue on Irish food studies. The terms are as follows: 'Essays are invited on all aspects of Irish food studies, from any relevant discipline(s). Topics might include, but need not be confined to, an investigation of the concept of, and what constitutes, 'Irish cuisine'; Irish systems and networks of food production, present-day or historic; engagements with food in Irish literature, song, film, theatre, the fine arts, etc.; Irish cookbooks or other prescriptive material; food education (at home or in formal primary to tertiary settings); Irish food production itself as creative practice; or comparative studies of Irish and other national food ecologies.… Submission guidelines are available on the CJIS website: <www.irishstudies.ca/canadian-journal-of-irish-studies>.'

LEEDS SYMPOSIUM ON FOOD HISTORY, 2015

The Leeds Symposium, which is held in York, has announced its dates on its website <http://www.leedsfoodsymposium.org.uk>. Doubtless this will be the place to go to obtain more information about enrolment and so forth. C. Anne Wilson earned an honourable retirement from the task of arranging everything and the direction of the Symposium devolved onto a committee from 2013/14. The subject this year is The Domestic Dairy, the convenor is Laura Mason, and the event will be held at the Friends' Meeting House, Friargate, York on Saturday, 25 April 2015.

MALTING IN EARLY IRELAND

The imminent appearance of William Sayers' collection of essays on food words and their meaning, *Eatymologies*, is reason enough to include this communication from him on the subject of malting barley. I am grateful indeed for his sending it:

Readers familiar with the wide range of offerings from Prospect Books will know of Andrew Dalby's recent translation of the thirteenth-century manual on household management and its French terminology (with Middle English glosses) by the Essex knight Walter of Bibbesworth (*The Treatise of Walter of Bibbesworth*, 2013). Among the familiar activities of a manorial estate Walter provides a lively description of malting and brewing. This has been judged the earliest running description of these domestic processes in a vernacular Western European language, although much of the relevant terminology is known from earlier glossaries and, to a lesser degree, household inventories, where context for a full understanding is often lacking. There are, of course, descriptions of brewing in more ancient sources, not least Egyptian, but the authors of classical Greece and Rome rather scorned beer as a barbarian drink. Contemporary snobbishness has deep historical roots. Little known in this regard, however, is a neighbouring vernacular account that predates Walter by 500 years.

Beer played an important role in early Irish conceptions of social responsibilities, particularly hospitality. Beer was generally called *cuirm* in Old Irish. Other terms are *linn*, originally 'liquid' then 'beer' (cf. Modern Irish *lionn*), *laith*, perhaps a ritual term, and, lastly and from a later period, *beóir*, derived from Old Norse *bjórr* and the result of the Viking incursions. *Scóaire* 'brewer' reflects an earlier archaic *scó* 'beer'. Brewing was an important craft, since beer provided vitamins and nutrients, especially during the winter months. But before beer can be brewed, barley must be malted. The Old Irish term for malt was *mraich* (later *braich*), with cognates in other Celtic and Indo-European languages.

After the missionary efforts of Palladius and Patrick in the fifth century, the Irish rapidly adopted Latin literacy and exploited the new written medium of record to produce a vast – and still little known – corpus of mythological, narrative, poetic, legal, and gnomic literature in the Irish language, for which the Latin alphabet was adopted. Native Irish law began to be committed to vellum in the eighth century, according to assessments made of the language in which it is recorded. Early Ireland seems to have been a litigious society, to judge by the amplitude of the legal tracts, which go so far as to set out the legal consequences of bees swarming.

The legal texts also establish a socio-legal framework for daily life, a kind of grid in which the vertical coordinate of hierarchy that runs through the various social ranks is crossed by the horizontal coordinate of the different occupations

of residents in the small tribal kingdoms. Thus noblemen, historians, poets, and entertainers all have their own internal rankings, as do landowners. One of these texts, *Cáin Aicillne* (The Regulations of Base Clientship), from about the year 700, is devoted to the rights and responsibilities of what is called a 'base' or 'unfree client' (Irish *céle giallna*), a small tenant farmer. Here we find a description of malting that, aside from ongoing difficulties that dog the study of Old Irish, is a fine early example of utilitarian prose. It resembles a food process as it might be prescribed in present-day government regulations and is then an idealized description, compared to likely actual practices. The early text is complemented by glosses introduced by successive generations of commentators, which do not always reflect a true understanding of the original text. Malted barley, less perishable than newly brewed beer, was among the annual food-rents that were due the local lord for each fief held by the tenant.

The text was first made available to a broad public with the publication of *Ancient Laws of Ireland* in the second half of the nineteenth century. This ground-breaking edition was marred by the then imperfect knowledge of the older language and by fundamental errors in understanding a jurisprudence that in many ways was quite foreign to the Europe of the times. A number of scholars have contributed to elucidating this text: the great Swiss philologist Rudolf Thurneysen in 1923, the legal editor and historian D.A. Binchy in 1978, Fergus Kelly in his book on early Irish farming (1997), and most recently Professor Liam Breatnach in a study of the Irish terminology for temporal units (2012). The present brief account is indebted to them all and offers a synthesizing translation of the Irish text, one drawing on newly available lexicographical resources such as the online version of the *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (*eDIL*).

The lowest grade of tenant farmer owes his lord one sack (approximately a bushel), of 'properly made malt without fault or blemish'. Farmers of higher rank owed multiples of this unit. The text might be translated thus:

> A sack of malt made from barley grown on well-drained, arable soil on level terrain, land suitable for root vegetables, that has been properly manured and been ploughed over a (dry?) three-day period in the month of March. Malt of three fortnights: a day and a night steeping, three days draining, nine days under cover, and three days and three nights lying exposed until it is heaped up in piles; and a fortnight in piles without being racked; and a fortnight in ridges after being racked, until it ready to be kiln-dried.
>
> Three tests are made on the malt: a test after it has been kiln-dried and before it is ground; a test after it has been ground – a small cake of it is made up in order to confirm its taste and its wholesomeness; a test of the wort before it begins to ferment.

Earlier commentators speculated that soil 'of three roots' was a reference to rich soil in which three common but thickly rooted weeds grew naturally. Others have seen here an early form of crop rotation. Pulses (peas, beans) would supply the soil with the nitrogen needed for good barley yields but, even though it is the nodules on the roots that transfer the nitrogen, pulses would not normally be called plants 'of the root'. Among root vegetables, the carrot-like skirret, parsnips, and turnips were grown. Soil quality does, however, seem uppermost here and the prescription, as would be logical, precedes that for manuring in the overall sequence of preparations for sowing.

The drying of cereals in kilns was common in early Ireland because of the wet climate and the technique, among other Viking booty, was later taken back to Scandinavia. The three stages of quality control have a very modern ring to them, as if from a Guinness production manual, although we must supply some complementary information. The barley was steeped in warm water. After draining, it was covered in thick straw and allowed to germinate, then exposed to the air to dry. After being raked in piles and then ridges, the malt was taken to the kiln, where it was cured to halt the growth of the acrospire and kill off the rootlets. After the malt was ground, the next stage in the process was mashing, in which the malt was drenched in warm water and the starch transformed into sugar and dextrins. The end product was the wort. By this time, the malt has passed from the hands of the tenant farmer to his lord's brewer and these later stages do not figure in the legal tract of client responsibilities.

In an iconic scene from early Irish narratives, a female figure associated with legitimate royal rule (earlier perhaps the goddess of the tribal land) presents a drink of red ale to the deserving candidate, promising him and his dynasty long and prosperous rule. The Irish word for sovereignty and legitimate rule is *flaith*. Under certain speech circumstances, the initial *f-* is lost, so that the word echoes *laith* 'beer'. The Irish love of wit and word-play has then been concretized in a narrative situation, in which the award of a drink of beer symbolizes the bestowal of the kingship. Regal ale, a king to regale!