

increased consumption of high-fat foods such as meat pies and sausage rolls. She points out that menus in the first three decades of the century included many fried items – croquettes, rissoles, fritters – but obesity was rare. Most telling, however, is the image juxtaposing a 1950s patty pan (cupcake) tin with a ‘giant Texas muffin pan’ introduced in 1994, to produce muffins that are effectively twice as large.

Although *Kitchens* focuses exclusively on New Zealand, its analysis of trends that have parallels in many other countries extends its relevance well beyond national borders.

BARBARA SANTICH

Hermione Eyre: *Viper Wine*: Jonathan Cape, 2014: 448 pp., hardback, £14.99.

It is somehow typical of the fervid ingenuity of the editor of this journal, that he should invite us to write a considered review of Hermione Eyre’s *Viper Wine*, a magic-realist novel about what one might call in anachronistic retrospect one of the most glamorous couples of the 1630s, Sir Kenelm Digby (alchemist, savant, courtier, recusant, polyglot, epicure, and lover) and his wife Venetia (wit, courtier, beauty, recusant, patron, muse). One of us is a cultural historian and historical novelist with a particular interest in the 1630s, the other a scholar of recusant Catholicism in Britain,<sup>1</sup> together we have edited Digby’s (posthumously published) compilation of recipes *The Closet Opened* for Prospect Books.

Three thoughts remain after reading this vastly energetic and often very finely written novel: the first is that it is a considerable success and, by approximations and brilliance and magical anachronisms, often comes very close indeed to what we can deduce of the texture of life in 1630s London, although to present the Digbys simply as celebrities in a contemporary sense is something of a dangerous reduction of them both. Venetia’s adult life becomes a very twenty-first century fable of beauty sought at any cost, with seventeenth-century procedures, real and invented, standing in for Botox and cosmetic surgery. Second, one remains astonished at the power of John Aubrey as a writer: his few pages of jottings about the Digbys in his *Brief Lives* – jottings never designed as more than research notes for another author, for all their careful distinction between fact and rumour – have defined the Digbys for posterity more than all the writings which they themselves left and commissioned, the numerous portraits, the houses and bequests and monuments. Thirdly, that there are aspects of the seventeenth century which seem now to elude our collective imagination, like radio stations which remain off-air however carefully the receiver is tuned. This otherwise successful novel gets into serious trouble whenever it approaches the subject which was probably most important to the Digbys themselves, and to the

vast majority of people alive in the 1630s, religion. That no reviewer, as far as we can see, seems to have pointed this out is an index of the extent to which this aspect of early-modern life has been tuned out. It would neither be entertaining nor courteous to make a list of the historical errors which attend this mysterious failure of research – it is not exactly impossible to discover what the practices of Tridentine Catholicism were, and the tolerated (if not liked nor loved) Court Catholics of 1630s England are pretty comprehensively documented, not least in those letters of Tobie Matthew's which are in their own distinctive way an anticipation of Jennifer's Diary.

It is far more to the point to congratulate the author on numberless shots which land splendidly and unconventionally on target, as she conjures (the right word) a window, a scrying glass, a listening device which is uncannily well trained on the nature of things in the 1630s. Elegantly and playfully, as times and technologies shift and spin around the figure of the baroque magus and his circle, perceptive truths are told about the nature of art, poetry and science in Caroline England. Digby was, naturally, working within the limitations of the science of his era, and the life of a courtier in disturbed times cannot have left him uninterrupted leisure for his studies, but nonetheless the historical Digby seems to have had intuitions which looked to the future – seeing that the notorious demoniac nuns of Loudun were in fact suffering from a form of mass-hysteria, even if his terminology for expressing this perception uses the vocabulary of sympathetic vibration and atomism. Even his much-ridiculed powder of sympathy has been considered by some medical historians as an attempt, in the terms of his day, to induce his contemporaries to forbear from introducing toxic materials into open wounds, but rather to keep them clean and covered with clean bandages.

The novel scrupulously clears Sir Kenelm of the crime of which contemporary rumour accused him: poisoning his wife with viper-wine, either out of jealousy or by giving it to her as a dangerous beauty-treatment, preferring an ingenious alternative whereby the Court beauties of the 1630s were procuring clandestine and equivocal cosmetics for themselves in secret. But let us, simply for entertainment, try to apply some of the techniques of the detective to the historical crime. Digby was specifically accused of poisoning Venetia with a viper wine. It is possible to guess with some accuracy what the viper wine might have been, and thus in fact to be very sure that he did not poison her. (Be it said that Hermione Eyre's invention of what it *should* have been is infinitely more amusing, grotesque, and splendidly imagined.)

The pharmaceutical use of animals, or parts of animals, goes back to the beginnings of European medicine: it is part of the *scientific* medicine of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance. Pliny, for example (to whom Digby was compared, not to his credit) in his *Historia Naturalis*, notes that: 'fiunt ex vipera pastilli, qui theriaci vocantur a Graecis' (they make pastilles

from vipers, which are called theriacs by the Greeks).<sup>2</sup> Galen and other ancient medical writers are unanimous as to the beneficial properties of viper's flesh when eaten.<sup>3</sup>

If we turn to George Hartman's collection titled *Choice and Experimented Receipts*, explicitly published in 1668 as being written up from Digby's own laboratory notes, we can be fairly certain that we find the culprit in the form of a recipe for *Bezoardicum Theriacale*. Both elements in this splendid name are terms of art. Bezoar stones, of animal origin (*calculi* from the stomach of a rare goat), were cure-alls: prescribed, for instance, for Charles II during the prolonged medical martyrdom which was his deathbed in 1685. Digby's recipe is thus for an artificial bezoar. A theriac is a technical medical term for a medicine of animal origin. In summary, this is how to make a theriacal bezoardicum, should you want one: take vipers, behead, skin and gut them, separate body, tongue, hearts and livers, and fat. Dry out bodies with the hearts and livers in a slow oven. Once thoroughly dried, powder the lot and mix it with a balsam composed of rosewater, spirits of wine, myrrh, aloe, yellow Sanders (*smyrnium olusatrum*), and attar of roses.

There are also directions for the administration of the mixture: 'Of this Bezoardique Theriacal Powder you are to give four or five grains for a dose *in some Broth or Wine*, either to be freed of a disease, that hath left great weakness behind it, or else for a preservative against the Infection of the whole nature, or bad air, and to keep ones self in good health, by continuing the same for some days. The Author [that is to say Sir Kenelm] doth commend a *continual* use of this Powder, for the keeping of one in good health.'

Well, this would appear to be it, but how poisonous is it liable to be? It would not be very nice (though pleasantly scented), but it was almost certainly harmless. Note that the heads and skins of the vipers are kept for other uses: the venom, if any survived heating – and most snake poisons are very fugitive – would presumably be in the salivary glands and thus in the head, which is recommended only for external use: 'worn near the throat [it] is excellent against the Squinsie'.<sup>4</sup>

Forgive this long digression, Reader, and, emphatically, *do not try any of this at home*, but do read Hermione Eyre's novel, which is replete with the baroque virtues of the 1630s: fascinations and grandeurs, wonders and marvels, paradoxical and ingenious beauties.

1. Indeed, author of an article about Viper Wine, 'Viper Wine' in Paul Scott (ed.) *Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity in the Republic of Letters* (Manchester: Manchester University Press (Durham Modern Languages series), 2010), pp. 33–46.
2. Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, xxix, ch. 21, cited in 'Serpent eating', *Notes and Queries*, first series, 6 (July–December 1852), 177.
3. Viper wine was recommended as a strengthening draught (with an implication

that it is sexually invigorating) by contemporaries Philip Massinger and Francis Quarles. Massinger, *Believe As You List: a Tragedy* (c. 1623), ed. T. Crofton Croker, first printed edition (London: Percy Society, 1849), Act IV, Scene 1, 65–9; Quarles, *The Historie of Samson* (1631), in *Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Francis Quarles*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, 3 vol. (Edinburgh: Chertsey Worthies Library, 1881), ii, 149. Beliefs in the strengthening powers of viper wine or broth still had some currency in the Victorian period: see for instance ‘Viperidae’, in Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, *The Penny Cyclopaedia*, 27 vol. (London: Charles Knight and Co., 1835–1843), xxvi, 347–354, 349.

4. Digby, *Choice and experimented receipts in physick and chirurgery as also cordial and distilled waters and spirits, perfumes, and other curiosities.... Translated out of several languages by G.H.* (London: printed for H. Brome, 1668), 245–9, 250, 253.

JANE STEVENSON & PETER DAVIDSON

[J. Rey]: *How to Dine in Style: The Art of Entertaining*, 1920: Bodleian Library, 2013: 160 pp., hardback, £12.99.

This attractive book is an abridgement of *The Whole Art of Dining*, published in London in 1920. The original was some 450 pages long, half of which were occupied by a dictionary of menu French; it also contained several illustrations, some in colour, which are not included in this present edition. The discussion extends to hotels and restaurants, perhaps even concentrates on those institutions, and does not restrict its observations to England alone – indeed, its most amusing passages are stereotypical views of foreign (and English lower-class) dining habits: Germans ‘talk coarsely to the waiter, eat with their knives, and are noted for being beer swillers.’ It is also interesting on the subject of tipping (largely anti). That momentary glimpse of sense and social justice apart, the text might drive its readers to revolution.

[Peter Hunt]: *The Food Lovers’ Anthology*: Bodleian Library, 2014: 298 pp., hardback, £20.

This is a reprint of a compilation by Peter Hunt ‘of Provincetown, Mass.’ entitled *Eating and Drinking. An Anthology for Epicures*, with a foreword by André Simon, first published by Ebury Press in 1961. The new version comes without the foreword. It is an acceptable anthology (including a fair number of items from *Wine and Food*, hence, perhaps, André Simon), indeed often amusing, although it is unclear why the Library chose to republish this above all others. It lacks any helpful bibliographic information beyond the most basic title list (without dates). The most interesting thing about this book is its compiler. On him the Bodleian is silent, but he seems to have been the American artist and decorator Peter Hunt who produced painted *naïf* furniture from his workshops in New England and was all the rage in the States from the 1930s. He died in poverty in 1967. Among his most popular books were *How to Transform Old Furniture* (1943) and *Transformagic* (1945). He also wrote *Peter*