

Jeffrey Parker: *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*: Yale University Press, 2013: 874 pp., illustrations, hardback, £29.99.

This long book would once have been a three-decker. This would have allowed it a larger typeface, more generous margins and made it easier to handle. But multi-volume books are no longer acceptable, more's the pity. Here we have a thoroughly good read and a provocation to thought. Professor Parker aims to explain the ghastly political cock-up that was the seventeenth century (until about 1680) – not just in Europe, but in China, Russia and the Ottoman empire. The professor would say that India and Japan managed to better weather the crisis, as did also the then-outlying continents of America, Africa and Australia. In a series of narrative chapters (first-rate summations, with a beady eye for telling facts and characters), he recounts the depths to which most major states sank during these decades. The causes were manifold and the narrative is a sorry catalogue of incompetence, stupidity, intransigence and human frailty. Into this mix is thrown the coincidental phenomenon of the Little Ice Age, the rigours of which only served to deepen the crisis. Parker's climatological account is horribly fascinating, and the links between the environment and its human occupants are of abiding interest (not least because of our present condition, discussed in a closing section). However, it's worth noting – as does he – that the poor weather continued for some decades after the resolution of our political problems. What seems to come out of this book, to this humble reader at least, is that politicians of the early seventeenth century were dealing with structures that were more complex than their abilities to cope, in particular the 'composite states' that were a feature of this period. These super-states arose in part because of the greater abilities of their rulers to exert control by military means (guns and forts), and the techniques of violence outran the ability to negotiate. It took most of this period to create mechanisms of political discourse sufficiently sophisticated to avoid disaster – and a lot of people died in the process. This is a must-read.

Rachel Laudan: *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History*: University of California Press, November 2013, £27.95

Readers will be familiar with my admiration for Rachel Laudan's food historical lucubrations on her website <<http://www.rachellaudan.com/>>.

Her latest contribution to the literature of food history is this time in book form: painstakingly researched and compellingly presented. This comprehensive exploration of the construction of empires throughout the history of the world and the role food played within such empires, as well as how it spread, developed and changed from one locality and one people to another, contains a wealth of historical detail. Laudan begins with the most fundamental, ancient and basic foodstuff which continues to form an integral part of the human diet: grain. This opening chapter; 'Mastering Grain Cookery 20,000–300 BCE' describes a significant factor in man's evolution into *Homo erectus*. This extends into a long contemplation on the origins of cooking and its role in brain enlargement, the development of the pleasure principle and the sense of taste, as well as how we coped with grain both in the field and on the stove – with a ramble down the lanes to the mill en route. In seven subsequent chapters she tells the tale of cookery around the world: the barley-wheat cuisines of the ancient empires; Buddhist cuisines; Islamic cuisines of central and west Asia; Christian cuisines in Europe and the Americas (to 1650); what she calls 'the prelude' to modern cuisines in northern Europe (to 1840); modern cuisines, which she epitomizes as 'middling cuisines' (1810–1920); and modern cuisines in the globalized world (1920–2000). As might be expected, the longest chapter is that discussing the Western style of cooking as it spread through a world both informed by and informing the imperial project in the nineteenth century. The *va et vient* of foods between subject peoples, colonists and home populations is a constant of each section and Laudan shows herself an inveterate internationalist. This is the sort of book that comes up at dinner parties: 'Have you read...?' Or it's part of the e-mail chatter of people interested in food around the world. It will be source and sauce for many conversations in the future.

Jon Stobart: *Sugar & Spice. Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650–1830*: Oxford University Press, 2013: 304 pp., hardback, £62.00.

At this price, most readers will not be rushing to their corner bookstore, but they may well put in a request at their library. No aspect of social history is currently more popular than consumer studies. We even have a book discussing shopping in ancient Rome. The consumer is seen both as actor (provoking historical change) and one acted upon (reacting to that change), and we can all see how the desire to consume may drive progress