

BOOK REVIEWS

Clarissa Dickson Wright: *A History of English Food*: Random House, 2011, 500 pp., hardback, £25.00.

Readers who have followed the author's various television programmes will immediately recognize her voice in the printed word. The style is chatty, almost breathless, and personal. For some this will increase the appeal of this long book, for others it may get in the way of an ambitious historical survey of the nation's eating, from the mid-twelfth to the twenty-first centuries. (But which nation? Page 269, for example, features both an ice-house in Northern Ireland and Keiller's Dundee Marmalade.) Without wishing to depersonalize a narrative which will appeal to many who are perhaps new to the fascination of food history, one could argue the need for a stricter editorial hand, not only to correct the spelling of Barnack (p. 10), Mazawattee tea (p. 369), and the misnaming of Kenilworth Castle as House (p. 497). As far as the structure of the book is concerned, removing such details as a chamberlain's duties (pp. 80–81) and building construction details (p. 100), as distinct from kitchen layout, would have resulted in a shorter and more focussed work.

This is very much food history from the top down: the first half of the book, to the late Stuart period, being a seemingly endless sequence of banquets, difficult to digest in any sense, with crumbs falling from the rich men's tables to the less fortunate classes. The author is aware of this, but the weight of the feasts so described threatens to crush the wide-ranging and significant contextual material which she also supplies. As she approaches the Georgian age, such developments as the use of turnips for winter cattle feed, attempts to popularize the potato, learned consideration of salads, even the introduction of the sweet orange, bring us closer to the modern scene. In this context the opportunity is missed on pp. 30–31 to draw a parallel between the medieval practice of culling greenstuff from the hedgerow and the modern advocacy of foraging.

There are no footnotes, but assiduous use of the bibliography will help to identify sources when these are not given directly in the text. In summary, an enthralling story, told by a (slightly garrulous) friend, who knows her subject thoroughly, from hard work in the kitchen as well as the library.

RICHARD STOREY