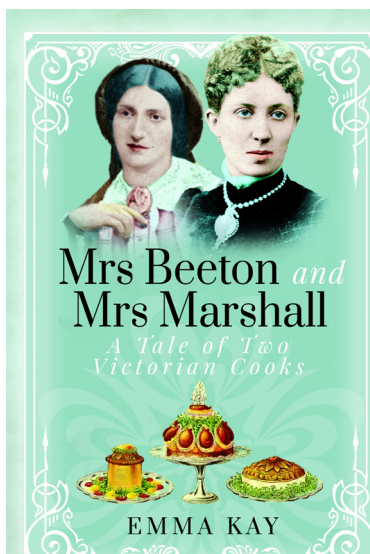


BOOK REVIEW

Emma Kay, *Mrs Beeton and Mrs Marshall: A Tale of Two Victorian Cooks*. Pen & Sword Books, Barnsley, 2023, £25



As readers of PPC the name Agnes Bertha Marshall (1852-1905) may be familiar to you. However, in the big wide world she is a largely an unknown quantity, eclipsed by the behemoth reputation of fellow Victorian cook, Isabella Beeton (1836-1865). Historian Emma Kay, who has written thirteen books on food history, has rectified this situation in this publication which compares the lives of these two Victorian women.

Mrs Beeton and Mrs Marshall: A Tale of Two Victorian Cooks has two chapters each allotted

to the titular characters. The first chapter devoted to each cook covers their early lives, relatives, marriages and subsequent careers. The second chapter in each section examines each women's recipes, with examples provided from their books, to provide an insight into their characters.

Little is known about Agnes B. Marshall. Despite running a successful cookery school, recruitment agency for servants and writing three cookery books, details on her private and professional life have remained elusive. Together with her husband Alfred their business endeavours included publishing the domestic magazine *The Table*, creating their own brand of food products (such as colourants and a savoury spread called Luxette) and patenting an ice cave and freezer. So why has she left a relatively faint footprint in culinary history?

Part of the issue seems to be the lack of archive material available.

A fire in 1911 at Ward, Locke & Co, Agnes's publisher, destroyed many of the Marshall records. This has made tracing her personal and professional life difficult for previous researchers. Kay was fortunate to have access to a collection of items relating to Mrs Marshall that belonged to a food history enthusiast Anthony Haynes (1944-2018). This information, together with her own diligent research have produced a rounded portrait of an accomplished business woman. The book also includes rare images of Agnes in full cooking demonstration mode while in New York taken a few years before her death from cancer in 1905.

In the introduction to this book Kay admits that prior to the project she had viewed Isabella Beeton as 'a usurper of far more worthy heroines'. However, as she conducted her own independent research she concedes that she felt guilty about her former attitude. Over the years criticism has been levied at Isabella for her lack of original recipes and the fact that she rarely acknowledged her sources (whereas Agnes asserted that all the recipes in her cookbook were her own). Kay reminds us that Isabella produced a book of household management, which extended far beyond the remit of the kitchen, as a valuable guide to young middle class women setting up their first home.

Would Mrs Beeton have achieved the status of domestic doyenne if she had lived passed her 28 years and produced more books? It is hard to say. By the time *Mrs Marshall's Cookery Book* was published in 1888, the Beeton myth was well on its way to being established. Mrs Beeton has become the byword for Victorian domesticity. Her name is instantly recognisable and therefore sells books. This is perhaps why her reputation has overshadowed other female cookery writers of the Victorian era.

Like Kay, I had been a tad dismissive of Mrs Beeton and her book in the past but having read this succinct biography I have greater respect for both. Whether you are a Beeton basher or cheerleader, *Mrs Beeton and Mrs Marshall: A Tale of Two Victorian Cooks* is a worthy read for the Marshall biography alone. It may just make you reconsider your view of Mrs Beeton too.

SAM BILTON