

BOOK REVIEWS

Aboriginal Communities of the Northern Territories: *Traditional Aboriginal Medicines in the Northern Territories of Australia*: Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 1993: ISBN 0 7245 2711 7: 674 pp, numerous b/w drawings plus colour photographs, glossary, bibliography, index, AUS\$90 (+ AUS\$40 postage for international airmail): to order, telephone INT'L + 61 89 894 529 or fax INT'L + 61 89 323 849 or write to Records, CCNT; PO Box 496; Palmerston NT 0831; Australia – and ask about their smaller publications on aboriginal uses of food plants etc etc.

'Lummo': *Rabbit on a Shovel*: Primavera, Leichhardt, Sydney: ISBN 1 875368 07 8: 190 pp, b/w drawings, table of contents doubles as index, price not stated (won't be much).

Ian Bersten: *Coffee Floats Tea Sinks*: Helian Books, Sydney, 1993: ISBN 0 646 09180 8: 284 pp (format a shade bigger than A4), almost innumerable colour and b/w illustrations, bibliography, index, AUS\$140 (price in UK £60.00, UK distributor Helian Books, PO Box 4, Radlett, Herts WD7 7JT, fax/phone 0923 857 150: US price \$90.00 + shipping – try the Coffee Bean, 1630A West Evans, Englewood CO 80110).

Aïda Kanafani-Zahar: *Mûne – La conservation alimentaire traditionnelle au Liban*: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris, 1994: ISBN 2 7351 0539 3: 280 pp, numerous b/w drawings and a section of colour photographs showing women working on the preservation of foods, glossary, bibliography, no index (but full table of contents), paperback, 195 French francs.

Gillian Riley: (1) *Renaissance Recipes*, (2) *Impressionist Picnics*, and (3) *The Dutch Table*: Pomegranate Artbooks, Rohnert Park CA, 1993: (1) ISBN 1 56640 577 7, (2) ISBN 1 56640 580 7, (3) ISBN 1 56640 978 0: 96 pp each, many colour reproductions of paintings, bibliography, index, £12.95 in the UK.

Joop Witteveen (ed): *Indisch Kookboek door eene Indische dame* (facsimile reprint): de Kan, Amsterdam, 1994: ISBN 90 801201 4 6: 118 pp, including added introduction by Joop Witteveen and glossary, 19 Dutch guilders (add 3 guilders for postage and order from de Kan, Binnenkadijk 237, 1018 ZG Amsterdam).

I reckon that all these books will interest food historians, although in very different ways.

The two largest and most impressive books, and the most amusing, come from Australia. The first, *Traditional Aboriginal Medicines*, catalogues and

illustrates (lovely b/w drawings and some colour photos) well over 150 plants (plus some insects and minerals) which aborigines of the Northern Territories use for medicinal purposes. A substantial number of the plants have culinary uses too; tamarind is just one example. Although little is said about these culinary uses – the book is essentially aimed at botanists, ethnobotanists, chemists, students of aboriginal medicine, etc – the work is a valuable reference for anyone interested in Australian food plants. The standard of presentation and production is high. A major achievement.

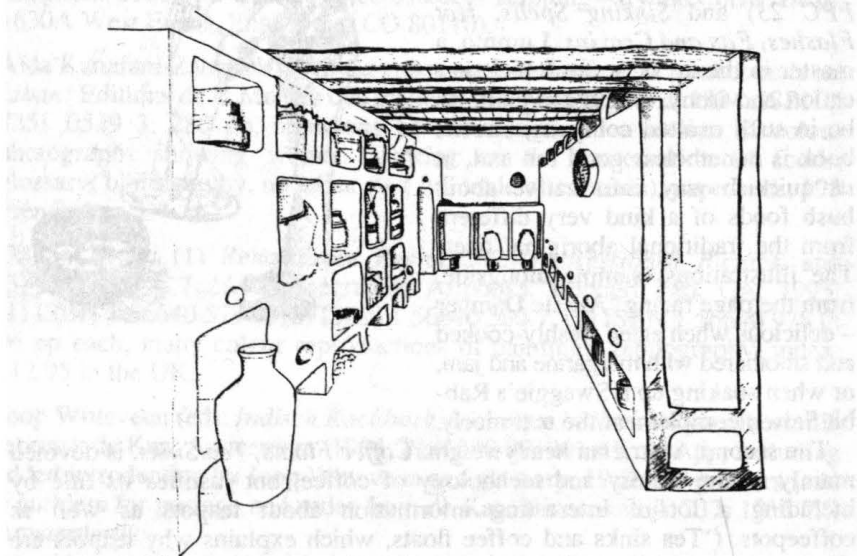
The lightweight, brought to us by Marcus Bell (who will be remembered by many readers and Oxford symposiasts for his long and valued involvement in our work) from the sugar-cane plantation in Queensland over which he and his Australian wife preside, exhales (mutatis mutandis for the change of hemisphere) something of the spirit of those two recent American classics by Ernest Mickler, *White Trash Cooking* (see PPC 23) and *Sinking Spells, Hot Flashes, Fits and Cravins*. Lummo, a master in the art of strine self-deprecation and irony, would not claim to be in such exalted company, but his book is nonetheless good fun and, in its quirkish way, informative about bush foods of a kind very different from the traditional aboriginal ones. The illustrations (sample alongside, from the page facing ‘Aussie Damper – delicious when eaten freshly-cooked and smothered with margarine and jam, or when soaking up a Swaggie’s Rabbit Stew’) complement the text nicely.



The second Australian heavyweight, *Coffee Floats, Tea Sinks*, is devoted mainly to the history and technology of coffee, but justifies its title by including a lot of interesting information about teapots as well as coffeepots. (‘Tea sinks and coffee floats, which explains why teapots are short and squat while coffee pots are tall.’) The large format, the lavish and wide range of illustrations, the wealth of historical material, both old and recent – all these factors produce a feast for the eye as well as the mind, and potentially for the palate too, since there is an exceptionally good analysis

of what happens when coffee is brewed in various ways and anyone reading this is almost bound to review her or his own techniques. There is a little about chocolate as a drink, but the book generally is around 80% coffee and 20% tea, the proportion being justified by the author on the basis of what reference works are already available (eg he skips over the Chinese and Japanese tea cultures, about which so much has already been written). His select bibliography includes pamphlets, newspapers, magazines and patents as well as books and is itself a valuable tool.

Of the books in this present batch, the one most clearly intended for food historians is *Mûne*. It was written in English but has found a French rather than a British publisher. The result is an exceptionally elegant volume, which is a delight to handle; and the contents are as good as the appearance. It is a scholarly and well organised survey of the resources in a Lebanese larder of preserved foods: fermented foods first; then sun-dried items; concentrates such as syrups, jams, tomato paste; and confits of meat; plus chapters on the physical arrangements for storing these staples and the role of women in doing the necessary work. A wholly satisfactory concept for a book, and a wholly satisfactory execution (English-language publishers please note – and you wouldn't have to have it translated!).



A store-room in a Lebanese home. On the right wall are large 'silos' for grain etc; on the left wall niches accommodate smaller storage units; and at the far end are storage jars resting on supports.

Gillian Riley's art-and-food books are quite special. Scholarly research of a high order combined with sheer brilliance in selecting the paintings for reproduction make the volumes completely harmonious, full of interest, and a visual delight. Oh to possess the watercolour commissioned by Camerarius (friend of Aldrovandi and Costanzo Felici) of nasturtiums grown for salads! Well, at least seeing it beautifully reproduced has been a wonderful surprise. I could go on thus for a long time, but my message is simple: buy these books, you will enjoy them. And you will enjoy them for the fine and illuminating writing as much as for the paintings. Take, for example, this passage on 'Camille Pissarro in the Cabbage Patch':

Camille Pissarro (1830-1903) was the only one of the Impressionists to paint the countryside with any sympathy for the people who shaped it and lived in it. His gardens were old-fashioned village plots, with pot herbs, flowers, and vegetables in a utilitarian rather than picturesque profusion. Very different from Monet's massed herbaceous borders—a city-dweller's view of nature—the apotheosis of the suburban garden. Pissarro's radical political views made him more concerned about the living conditions of the peasants he painted. He never quite forgave Jean-François Millet (1814-75) for using them as romantic ingredients in his landscapes.

The laconic Édouard de Pomiane (see page 47) allowed himself the luxury of a purple patch at the beginning of his memorable cabbage broadcast:

"The Feast of All Saints has expired and the shaggy crysanthemums fade slowly on its grave, lit up by the dying fall of the last rays of the autumnal sun. The somber market stalls have lost their glowing vegetables, only the odd crimson carrot glows alongside the huge, rotund forms of the palid green and white cabbages." Winter does have its compensations....

Joop Witteveen, author of many important essays in *PPC*, has done us all a service in editing the reproduction of what was the first Dutch-language book (in 1872) to present genuine Indonesian dishes and virtually nothing else (earlier books on 'Indonesian cooking' had a large Dutch colonial content). This is a small paperback, with a neat and charming cover: a choice item.

A.E.D.