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The role of food writing and publishing in promoting and resisting change in Australia and New Zealand in the 1920s

Abstract:

Cultural histories suggest that the 1920s were an important decade in the process of modernisation of many aspects of life in Australia and New Zealand. Moreover, Australasia was not just the passive receptacle for influences and approaches from abroad but was instead, as David Carter has found, 'a site of and for modernisation in its own right' (2008, 74.1). There was, however, also resistance to these changes. In culinary terms, the 1920s did witness a number of new foods, products, recipes and cooking technologies both created in Australasia and introduced to local consumers from overseas, but a significant number of existing ingredients, meals and food preparation methods also endured alongside these innovations. At times, the latest culinary ideas were energetically contested, as were the publications that promoted them. This paper focuses at Australasian food writing in the 1920s to investigate how food writers, and the publications they wrote for, took an active role in championing *and* resisting change in both the culinary and wider arena at this time, and how readers contributed to this discussion. In doing so, this historically based study provides an example of how we can define and discuss the way writers can, and do, engage with the issues that are important to readers.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Food writing – Culinary innovation – 1920s Australian and New Zealand cuisine

Introduction

Cultural histories, including those of writing and other art forms, suggest that the 1920s were an important decade in the process of modernisation of many aspects of life in Australia and New Zealand. Australasia, moreover, was not just the passive receptacle for influences and approaches from abroad but was, as David Carter has found, ‘a site of and for modernisation in its own right’ (2008, 74.1). As in other decades, however, there was also resistance to these changes – although this resistance is missing from many of the dominant narratives about the 1920s. In culinary terms, the 1920s witnessed a number of new foods, products, recipes and cooking technologies both created in Australasia and introduced to local consumers from overseas; however, a significant number of existing ingredients, meals and food preparation methods endured alongside these innovations. There was also some energetic contestation of the latest culinary ideas and the publications in which they were embodied.

The below focuses on Australasian food writing from the 1920s to investigate how food writers, and the publications they wrote for, took an active role in championing *and* resisting change in both the culinary and wider arena at this time. It also includes an indication of how readers contributed to this discussion.

Culinary change and consistency

In Australia, key events of the 1920s that are often cited in support of the narrative of ever-increasing culinary modernity include English chocolate makers Cadbury setting up a factory in Tasmania in 1921, the development of Vegemite in 1922, the Eskimo Pie ice cream being sold under licence in Sydney in 1923 and Aeroplane Jelly’s appearance in Australian shops from 1928. The 1920s also saw the arrival in Australia of a number of well-known brands including PMU, Kellogg’s, Kraft and Sanitarium, as well as many long-enduring lollies such as the Violet Crumble, Cherry Ripe and Minties (Risson 2011). There were similar brand and product launches in New Zealand. Yet most of these new products or brands continued or, at most, slightly expanded existing tastes or culinary practices. Vegemite, a local copy of UK-produced Marmite yeast extract, is a good example of this emulation (Farrer 157; Symons 151).

In contrast, the Eskimo Pie (a foil-wrapped, chocolate-covered vanilla ice-cream bar) was one of the more innovative mass-consumer products of this period, for it took the uptake of mechanical refrigeration for ice cream to be produced, stored and sold commercially on a wide scale, let alone be made or kept at home at a time when the majority of domestic households in Australia had iceboxes at most. The Eskimo Pie was licensed, and its wrappers imported, from America (Funderburg 1995; Smith 2006), which together with soon-to-be popular Melbourne brand Peter’s ice cream begun by an American in 1929 (Symons 2007, 149), showed the influence the USA was having on Australian foodways. UK-based food company Foster Clark also played a significant part in the growing popularity of ice cream in Australia. This was not just through its locally produced range of custard powders, jelly crystals and pudding mixes that could be used in making ice cream at home. The company also

produced a popular Australian cookery book, the *Foster Clark's cookery book*, published in Sydney in the 1920s and heavily advertised in newspapers and magazines. This volume promised that 'delicate' and 'high-class' puddings and desserts could be made easily and cheaply at home using Foster Clark products, and the most deluxe of these in the 1920s was ice cream. Ice cream also featured prominently in the illustrations of this cookery book.

Despite such innovation in this and many other examples of culinary writing, a number of Australian cookbooks written and published in the 1920s promoted enduring culinary practices and values. Revealing this interest in culinary continuity, some volumes from previous decades indeed remained so popular that they were reissued. This narrative of innovation versus continuity was, moreover, often more complicated than this duality suggests as, while some of these reissued volumes were direct reprints of earlier texts, others were new or expanded editions that included some novel material alongside older content.

One such cookery book was *The worker cook book* – first published in 1914 and then in 1915, c 1923 (by which time 35,000 copies had been sold) and later – which collected the readers' recipes sent to well-known poet and short-story writer, feminist and social crusader Mary Gilmore, for her Women's Page in *The Worker*, the official journal of the Australian Workers Union.[1] The various editions of this book did include new products, recipes and cookery methods, however, it also evidences how long-established material was also kept in circulation by such culinary dialogue between readers who contributed tried-and-true recipes, experiences and anecdotes in response to queries from other readers and columnists. A selection of favourites such as stewed tripe, turnip pie and lamingtons duly recurred across editions, although this was alongside more innovative and technically challenging recipes in the 1920s edition such as those for roast turkey, lentil fritters and scalloped lobster (Strauss 2008). This book was so compelling that it was apparently worthwhile pirating in the 1920s, when it was reprinted as *The Mary cookbook*. A copy exhibited in the National Library of Australia in Canberra from 2005 to 2006 (and which then toured the country until 2007) contains a handwritten note from Gilmore, warning that this was an unauthorised copy of her work (NLA 2005).

A close reading of this, and other, texts shows that the ingredients used in these 1920s culinary narratives are revealing of both continuity and change. In common with those from previous decades, Australian cookbooks of this time contained many recipes for then 'traditional' meats including many forms of offal: kidneys and liver, ox and pig cheeks to be made into brawns and stews, sheep's tongues, sheep and pig's trotters, and sheep and bullock's hearts. Boiling, frying, roasting, stewing and simmering in soups endured as common ways of cooking meats. Rabbit was very common in cookbooks at this time in Australia, and remained popular as a cheap source of protein during the Depression at the end of the decade. There are, however, fewer recipes for kangaroo than in previous decades, with oxtail taking its place in the rich soup that was common on colonial menus (and, thus, reflecting the continuing shift from rural to urban lifestyles). Homegrown or in-season fruit remained the popular choice for making preserves and jams as well as puddings and jellies, with apples and lemons very common ingredients, as are sultanas and currants.

A number of 'mock' recipes from previous decades also recur throughout the 1920s in Australian cookery books – and these proliferate in the harder times at the end of the decade. Economy was not, however, the only reason for attempting a copy of a certain dish or ingredient such as goose, duck, fish, cream or butter. Innovative adaptations due to the climate, seasonal or local supply and lack of refrigerated storage all prompted the ingenious substitution of what was available for inaccessible or impossible-to-obtain ingredients, and were reported in detail in these cookery texts. This was certainly the case in tropical Queensland where articles and recipes narrate how mock-berry jams, jellies and other preserves and desserts continued to be made in the 1920s with a range of ingredients including pineapple, pie-melons and tomatoes (see Addison & McKay 1999).

New cooking technologies were available and new cookbooks focusing on gas and electric cookery were produced and disseminated. This did not mean, however, that every home or all the culinary literature intended to be used in them was immediately updated to incorporate their use. Popular cookbooks such as Wattle Blossom's *Off the beaten track* (1924) and *The worker cookbook* reflected this by continuing to print recipes for 'one pot' meals cooked in camp ovens or frypans over an open-fire hearth (Webber 2009).

Advertorials – advertisements posing as articles – for cookbooks in newspapers at this time also promised aid with making both old favourites and new dishes. A column in the *Hawera & Normanby Star* in 1924, for instance, about the new *Cathedral brand essences cookery book*, clearly written to promote the booklet, is guaranteed to help readers 'improve dishes you know, and how to make numerous dainties you do not yet know' and includes recipes for chocolate cream pie, chocolate potatoes and colonial pudding. Its author, Miss Mildred Trent, was lauded as 'New Zealand's leading cookery expert', her name alone 'ample guarantee for every recipe given' (Stevens 1924, 10). Trent visited Australia in the 1930s when, as Dominion president of the National Council for Women of New Zealand, she represented the organisation at a conference in Sydney in 1938 (Smith 2010) following a visit three years before (*Sydney Morning Herald* 1938, 21).

Cookbooks similarly crossed the Tasman, taking their messages with them. A list of books available by post from Norman E Aitken's Book Arcade in Wellington in 1920, for instance, included *The Australian cookery book* which would be supplied 'post free on receipt of 2/6', the same price as a popular novel at this time (*NZ Truth* 1920, 4). This may well have been *The Schauer Australian cookery book* by cookery instructor Amy Schauer, who has been described as 'the *real* authority in matters culinary in Queensland in the first three decades' of the twentieth century (Addison & McKay 1999, 7; Ryan 2006).

As well as promoting Australasian texts, Australian and New Zealand newspapers at this time regularly reviewed cookbooks from the rest of the world. In 1928, New Zealand's *Evening Post* featured a review of *From caviare to candy* by Mrs Philip Martineau, English socialite and author of a number of books on garden design and cookery in the 1920s and 1930s. Published in London, this volume featured a series of highly unusual international recipes from countries as diverse as Chile, Cuba,

Norway, Sweden, Russia, Peru, Rumania, Spain and Turkey alongside Britain and France, with the review particularly commending the American salads ('M.H.C.' 1928, 21). A small number of vegetarian cookbooks were also positively reviewed at this time – despite the focus on meat in the diets of both Australians and New Zealanders.

The above suggests that cookbooks, and the innovations they introduced, were universally appreciated; however, criticising and ridiculing these texts was one way of resisting any changes they promoted. One such article in the Melbourne *Argus* warned that cookbooks were useless as 'cooking cannot be acquired away from the kitchen' (1922, 10), while another in the *Evening Post* counselled women not to waste their money on a cookbook as the daily problem of 'What shall we have for dinner to-day?' could not be solved by cookbooks. This was because every family had 'its own special likes and dislikes … You know them, but the cookery book doesn't' (1927a, 13). Instead, this column advocated women-authored, personalised, month-by-month guides based on their own menus using foods in season.

In a further elaboration of this derogatory tone, cookbooks also served as the punchlines to a series of jokes based on the idea that young wives could not cook. 'Leathery' in the Wit and Humour column of the *Evening Post* in 1922 is a clear example of this:

> 'Well, well', he exclaimed, as he tackled her first meat pie, 'where did you get this?'
>
> 'I made that out of Mrs Snorter's cookery book,' replied the young wife. 'It's a --'
>
> 'Ah!' he broke in. 'This leathery part is the binding, I suppose?' (14)

'Conchological cookery' in Melbourne's *Fitzroy City Press* in 1920 is another example, this time reflecting the uselessness of cookery books for young wives with little culinary knowledge.

> 'I say Mary, the bones in this bird are thicker than a whale's. I just broke the knife on them,' said a young married man as he struggled to carve the first turkey his wife had cooked.
>
> 'You must be against the shells John,' the wife remarked.
>
> 'The shells?'
>
> 'Yes John, don't you remember that you asked me to stuff the turkey with oysters?' (2).

Cookbooks could also be an alien distraction as in 'One cook too many' in New Zealand's *Evening Post* at the end of the decade:

> Mrs Newlywed: I've told you before to keep out of the kitchen, Dick.
>
> Hubby: Why, what have I done?
>
> Mrs Newlywed: You've knocked down my cookery book and lost my page, and now I haven't the faintest idea what I was cooking. (1929, 25)

These humorous little narratives also contain information about habitual practices and changes in the foodways of the period: all cooks should, apparently, have been able to

make meat pies, while turkeys were new and quite exotic. What these jokes narrate about young wives (who had presumably little skill in the kitchen) is also fascinating. In ‘Leathery’, there is something heroic in that ‘tackling’ of a first meat pie, and clear that in the valiant – although obviously failed – attempt, she desires to please her husband, as does the wife who has no experience of oysters. The wife of the husband who dislodges her cookbook has so little interest in cookery that she does not even know what she is in the process of preparing – yet she too has selected something from her book for her spouse’s pleasure.

Much was made throughout the decade in Australia and New Zealand writing of the social and personal consequences of women’s lack of culinary skill. With more and more women working outside the home before (or even instead of) marriage, this unease was articulated again and again throughout the decade. A happy marriage was often linked to satisfactory catering, and not only in culinary columns. A doctor’s advice column in 1922 stated that ‘A list of at least a dozen sauces should be hung up in every domestic kitchen if only to diminish the work of the divorce courts’ (*Argus* 1922, 10). A column in the crime pages of the *NZ Truth* in February 1925 titled ‘Crook cooks and cooked crooks: tragedy of the man who marries a woman who cannot boil water without burning it’ (1925b, 5) jokingly, although rather shockingly, suggested that a man with an unsatisfied stomach may eventually be pushed so far as to become a murderer and, if so, the cook would be to blame. In a case of life emulating fiction, less than a month later the newspaper carried another article titled ‘An affaire de stomach’, subtitled ‘Wife’s dishes bring desolation on the home – heavyweight husband’s elephantine moods’ in which a violent husband’s legal counsel argued that ‘the whole of the trouble was owing to her unfortunate inability to cook properly’. The magistrate, however, found that the husband took ‘an abnormal view of married life’ and granted the wife a separation and maintenance settlement (*NZ Truth* 1925a, 6).

As more and more women worked outside the home, convenience foods became more popular, and anxiety about this was reflected in concerns over its nutritional value. In 1924, a New Zealand *Evening Post* writer asserted that:

> Many young people, especially girls, break down in health because they do not know how to feed themselves properly. They have in their rooms few conveniences for cooking, and are too frequently content with tinned food or the ubiquitous boiled egg. (1924, 16)

There were debates over this aspect of modern culinary culture, too, with more than one writer taking the more optimistic view that it was better to have ‘the lesser quantity of vitamines in tinned and preserved food than none at all’ (‘F.G.’ 1926, 5). When a long article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in November 1926 reported on a visiting English domestic economy expert who, while commending the ‘domestic versatility’ of Australian women, found fault with their reliance on tinned foods, an Australian author countered with the information that these preserved foodstuffs were useful because of ‘our vast distances, our heat, and … places where the rainfall – or lack of it – prevents the growth of green food’ (‘F.G.’ 1926, 5).

This message regarding the value of fresh food was developed in an article in the *Evening Post* in September 1925, which reported on the health benefits of a new, 'more natural diet than is customary', based on 'cereals, fruit, nuts, vegetables, cheese, and oils, with little, and, often no meat'. This was identified as Italian (*Evening Post* 1925, 9) and is close to our own idea of a Mediterranean diet (see, for other early examples, Santich 2009, 219-20). In stark contrast to this promotion of dietary innovation, articles on Christmas meals each December throughout the decade confirmed that English Christmas foods 'Roast turkey, plum-pudding, mince pies … are the essential dishes' (*Evening Post* 1926, 23). Even for this most traditional of celebration feasts, however, innovation was possible with an article in the *Evening Post* in 1927 noting that 'Christmas is changing', and not only suggesting a substitute for turkey (chicken cooked in butter) but even offering a vegetarian option: a loaf of 'pounded monkey-nuts and panada, flavoured with marmite and garlic' (1927b, 3) – panada being a paste of breadcrumbs, toast or flour combined with milk, stock or water used for making soups, binding forcemeats, or thickening sauces.

By the end of the decade, Australian 'Vesta' linked changes in culinary practice to social changes, noting that the shift to more rapidly cooked cuts of meat, especially steak, chops and small legs and shoulders had been caused by the

> growth of motoring, the increasing popularity of picnicking, the extension of flat life, gas cooking, the enormous increase of the number of women in business, smaller families, cinemas, wireless, and the generally more varied life now enjoyed. ('Vesta' 1928, 8)

Despite these changes, the work of the housewife was still recognised as extremely onerous: 'Labor-saving devices have been invented to lighten the housewife's task, but it is she who must still do the catering and supply her household with a variety of tasty, wholesome dishes' (*NZ Truth* 1927, 15). An article titled 'Communal kitchens: to lighten the housewife's burden' in the *Hawera & Normanby Star* in early 1920 noted that the preparation of the main (midday) meal and the clearing up afterwards 'took about three hours a day – time which many mothers with two or three young children can ill afford' (5) and suggested that central kitchens, like those established in Great Britain during the first world war, could be set up in New Zealand, and cooked meals distributed to homes in heat-retaining vessels. Another benefit – 'a considerable economy in the cost of meals' (*Hawera & Normanby Star* 1920, 5) – reflected the relatively high cost of food through the decade in both countries, and an understanding of the 'evils resulting from lack of sufficient milk and products, meat, fish, vegetables, and fruit' in New Zealand (*Evening Post* 1920, 9). Various solutions were posed and included the 'study of French cookery, wholemeal bread, cold storage of eggs, etc gathered during summer, and a proper system of distribution' (*Evening Post* 1920, 9).

Conclusion

In the 1920s, authors on culinary matters in popular publications offered their readers both innovation and ways of resisting it. As Jan Kershaw has noted in relation to *The Australian Women's Weekly* in the 1930s, these publications offered 'mixed messages

… promoting modernity, while at the same time ameliorating its most difficult aspects; partly progressive, but still confining' (2010). This may have been an attempt to attract a diverse readership, but the above provides evidence that, in taking an active role in both championing and resisting changes to culinary practice, these writers were also, quite consciously, providing a range of varied options and opinions for their readers to pick and choose from. In doing so, they provide a vivid example of how writers can, and do, engage in the issues that are important to readers. It also shows how resisting change can sometimes make an important contribution to social and cultural formations.

Endnotes

1. Such reader-contributed content is a feature of the cookery sections of magazines and the women's pages of newspapers of the 1920s (and later decades) in Australia and New Zealand, and endures today in many popular periodicals.

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