

***The English Breakfast: The Biography of a National Meal with Recipes.* Kaori O'Connor. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 376 pp.\***

Reviewed by Maria Kennedy

*The English Breakfast: The Biography of a National Meal with Recipes* by Kaori O'Connor is a delightful read on a very appetizing topic. O'Connor is an anthropologist working as a Senior Research Fellow at University College London and has achieved recognition with a public audience through appearances on British television and radio. These appearances include a recent BBC television program called *Breakfast*, hosted by *Two Fat Ladies* cooking show personality Clarissa Dickson Wright. This was part of a miniseries that also covered *Lunch*, and *Dinner* and was a part of BBC's *Food Glorious Food Season* in 2012, which included other historical ventures into British food history such as *Food in England: The Lost World of Dorothy Hartley*, hosted by Dr. Lucy Worsley.<sup>1</sup>

Britain's broadcasting culture actively embraces serious historical and cultural topics more than American broadcasting does, and academics like O'Connor not only get airtime, but have an opportunity to write serious history for a more general audience who encounter her work through related television and radio programs. This volume represents a contribution to the growing mid-range of scholarly publication aimed at a discerning general readership, while still making a valuable contribution to professional scholarly discourse and publication. The subject of food culture and history continues to be a popular one in public and academic discourse, so it is exciting to see substantive works like this one entering circulation.

The book accomplishes this dual-readership purpose by providing a fairly predictable linear historical narrative of British social and political life that is accessible for a general audience but filled with absorbing detail on the subject of breakfast. It describes the emergence of particular foods, styles of cookery, modes of dining, and social attitudes about eating as we move from the pre-Roman period through the 21st century. The professional scholar will perhaps find this approach unremarkable, but the greater contribution to the scholarly reader lies in the reprinted material presented in the text. About three quarters of this 367 page volume consists of reprinted cookery texts, either in their entirety or as sections excerpted from larger works.

These texts, explicitly on the subject of breakfast, include *The Breakfast Book: A Cookery Book for the Morning Meal or Breakfast Table*, written by Georgina Hill and published in 1865, which represents what O'Connor describes as an aspirational text composed for an upper middle class family. Its dishes show French influence and, "a definite preference for the elaborate over than the simple" (71). *Breakfast Dishes for Every Morning of Three Months* by Miss M.L. Allen, published in 1884, was intended for an audience with more economical considerations. It offers the reader recipes for the dishes first, and then a three-month plan of menus consisting of combinations of these dishes. *Fifty Breakfasts* by Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney Herbert, published in 1894, similarly offers the reader 50 daily breakfast menus, but rather than separating recipes, offers them together with the menus. Additionally, excerpts from larger works include

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“Breakfast and the Breakfast Table” from the *Young Ladies’ Journal* and the “Tabular Introduction” by Sir Frederick William Andrewes to *The Dictionary of Dainty Breakfasts* by Phyllis Browne, published in 1898.

The relationship of these reprinted texts to the introductory narrative of the history of breakfast is not always clear, and in writing this review, I found I was forced to flip back and forth between the reprinted texts and the introductory narrative to find dates of publication for the texts that one wishes were available in the short paragraphs introducing the texts. The reprinted texts also represent a very specific era—Victorian and Edwardian periods—in the history of culinary works available on the topic of breakfast, and the reasons they have been chosen as part of the volume are not immediately clear.

One would have liked to see texts representing each of the major eras described in the introduction to illustrate the historical arguments that the author makes about the relationship of breakfast not only to historical eras, but to cultural ideas that particularly define the evolution of English cultural identity. Her argument introduces the rise of the gentleman as a social ideal and the growth of aspirational middle class culinary habits, the development of the country house breakfast as the prototype of culinary ideals of estate-produced simple “English” fare, and the effect of war-time rationing on the decline of traditional breakfast foods and social life, to name a few. Each of these fascinating points, glossed over rather quickly in the introductory narrative, could easily comprise entire chapters or volumes in themselves. The introductory material to each individual reprinted text is too short, and this reader wished for more context.

The culinary texts themselves are a delight to read. Here we can see the diversity and complexity of the meals contemplated in print for morning consumption in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. Our fare today, even the “full English” or the weekend “fry-up,” pale in comparison to these repasts. Some examples include recipes for “Pickled Thrushes or Snipes,” “Brain Cakes,” and “Broiled Pheasant.”

The general reader will find in these historical recipes a visceral relationship to food in its more basic, unprocessed forms—whole vegetables and fruits, joints and cuts of meat and offal that one rarely encounters in the supermarket. Weights and measures, not yet as standardized as they are today, are usually of less importance than descriptions of various kinds of kitchen labor and preparation processes that factories and appliances now accomplish.

Reading through these texts, the material presence of food, kitchens, and cooking labor begins to take tangible shape in the imagination. Indeed, O’Connor encourages the reader to move beyond a literary engagement with the texts to a culinary encounter: “Those interested primarily in culinary and social history may read the cookbooks as texts, but it is hoped that they will try the recipes. When reading or writing about food, one should also be able to taste it” (55). I appreciate this closing statement at the end of the introduction, for it launches the book out of the dusty realms of history and academic discourse and into the experiential world of the reader. Positioned as the book is amongst of plethora of broadcast media and popular writing on the subject, O’Connor’s interest in engaging history beyond the page seems refreshing and appropriate here.

This book represents a valuable resource of reprinted cookery texts, and an intriguing though abbreviated argument about the historical development of English culture and identity through the emergence of an iconic meal. O'Connor does an admirable job of deconstructing "The Full English" that most UK readers take for granted and reminds us that even our most habitual actions, such as how we prepare and consume food, are continually evolving and filled with meanings we enact even without being conscious of their material origins.

## **Note**

1. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00y89tj>, accessed July 6, 2014.

*Maria Kennedy is a doctoral candidate in folklore studies at Indiana University. Her research looks at the relationship between environmental conservation, cultural heritage, and agricultural economies in the United Kingdom. Her ethnographic dissertation project, based in Herefordshire, examines orchard landscapes and craft cider production as sites of evolving attitudes towards the meaning and use of rural landscapes in post-industrial Britain.*

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