

***Jamaican Food: History, Biology, Culture*, by B.W. Higman (University of West Indies Press, 2008).**

The recent exhibition of historic Australian cookbooks at the State Library of New South Wales, curated by Pat Turner, revealed the taste of early European settlers for bandicoot, kangaroo brains and black swans. While most undoubtedly relied on British staples, Australia's first known cookbook (1864) also includes a recipe for 'slippery bob', a dish of kangaroo brains fried in emu fat.

Hybridity is a staple if much debated concept of postcolonial studies, not unrelated to creolism, which is a more familiar term in food studies; yet postcolonial interest in examining the culture of food as part of the colonial experience has been slow to develop. Increasingly we recognise that contemporary food-related practices have social and economic as well as cultural outcomes. Yet, as the organisers of the first SOAS Food Studies Centre conference at the University of London observed earlier this year, the complex relationship between food and migration remains both under-researched and under-theorised. This neglect applies particularly to studies of the British Empire and its aftermath, despite the British embrace of curry from India, tea from China and the potato from South America. Jamaica, home of the Taino and Arawaks, was colonised first by the Spanish, then by the English, who imported first slaves from Africa then indentured labourers from China and India. Its food is as richly fascinating as its complex history. Barry Higman's book, *Jamaican Food: History, Biology, Culture*, is an extremely welcome and fascinating contribution to a multi-dimensional and important new area of inquiry.

In his study of the former French colony of Gabon in West Africa, *A Workman is Worthy of His Meat Food* (2007), Jeremy McMaster Rich notes that in the capital of Libreville croissants are as readily available as plantains; yet food scarcities resulting from slavery and the violence of colonial conquest have helped shape the nation's history, and today, when two-thirds of the country's food is imported from outside, the cost of living in Libreville is comparable to that of Tokyo and Paris. In Europe, the effect of colonialism on the development of national cuisines was monumental, as Raymond Sokolov reminds us in *Why We Eat What We Eat: How the Encounter between the New World and the Old Changed the Way Everyone on the Planet Eats* (1991): 'The French, Italian, and Spanish food "traditions" we now think of as primeval all sprang up relatively recently, and would be unrecognizable without the American foods sent across the water, mostly in Spanish boats.' Higman begins with Sokolov's question, more narrowly focused: 'Why Do Jamaicans Eat What they Eat?'

The fascination begins with facts. Not one of the ingredients of either of the two dishes that have for so long battled in contention as Jamaica's national dish – ackee and saltfish, versus rice and peas – is endemic (meaning 'indigenous and unique to the island'). But it wasn't always so. Early British visitors emphasized 'delicacies' such as ringtail pigeon, fresh-water mountain mullet and black land-crab – all wild animals, all endemic, 'all known for themselves' rather than in culinary combination, unlike the imported vegetable elements of the dishes that came to replace them.

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Neither could they be easily transported. None of these old-time ‘delicacies’ survive now. But I have fond memories of hunting land-crabs by torchlight not so long ago with friends on the dirt roads of the remote Black River country: we failed dismally, but a local family friend held some captive in a cage, feeding them on corn and bread, so that our feast would not be prevented. Land-crabs, I am told, should only be eaten in months that do not contain the letter ‘r’ – months, that is, when they are not feeding on the flowers of the coffee plant, and so retain their natural flavour. We had them in a soup with callaloo – ‘a permanent resident in the islands kitchen gardens,’ often likened to spinach, though of ‘recent origin in the realm of the weeds’ according to Higman, and, as noted in 1900 in *The Gleaner*, ‘the most versatile and widely used green leafy vegetable in Jamaica.’

What constitutes a weed as opposed to other introduced or imported plant species is an interesting question. It was only in the nineteenth-century, Higman tells us, that delicacies began to emerge in Jamaica that were not endemic or indigenous to the region, as well as ‘not animal’, and that were identified as dishes (rather than simply as plants, or animals). These are the kinds of fascinating historical but also broadly ethnographic questions with which Higman deals in the introductory section of his book: the changing distinction between a delicacy and a dish (or for that matter a curiosity, something advertised for tourists); the shift from animals to plants as food sources; or from indigenous to naturalised and imported ingredients. The indigenous survived best among the fruits, and the animals of the sea. In a later chapter on mammals, Higman considers the human as food source, noting that milk is the only human food consumed by Jamaicans, and as elsewhere in the world, that it is and apparently has always been reserved for infants. The word ‘cannibal’ is well known to derive from the region’s indigenous ‘Carib’ people, and English references to the practice of cannibalism among the Caribs begin as early as 1661, just six years after English forces seized the island from the Spanish. But the liking for ‘barbacu’d’ human meat was grossly exaggerated, if not entirely fictional, and is now widely disputed. The white planters too, despite considering their African slaves not only inferior but also a different species to be counted among the plantation livestock, never consumed them as human meat. In the eighteenth century, however, white planters often had their children suckled by black wet nurses; and this continued, Higman, tells us, into the 1930s.

The later sections of the book – most of it, in fact – are taxonomically organized under the headings: plants, animals and inorganic mater (salt, earth, water). Of course, each of these is also divided into sub-sections, so that under plants for example we have roots, stems and leaves, fruits, and seeds. The information throughout is consistently rewarding. Consider for example, among the fruits, the star apple, which gives rise to the dessert dish ‘Matrimony’. *Jamaican Food* is not a recipe book, but you will find recipes in it from time to time, and one of these is the recipe for ‘Matrimony’, a concoction of star apples, oranges, sugar and cream (sometimes with sherry or rum). More interesting, though, is how the dessert acquired its name, especially given the island’s relatively low regard for marriage – if this is to be measured by the marriage rate, at least, and by the number of children born out of wedlock. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives among the meanings of ‘matrimony’

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one from slang usage: the ‘mixture of two comestibles or beverages’, generally ‘injudicious’ in combination. Jamaica provides only one of the citations, but it is interesting to speculate about the metaphorical import of that example (from the journal of a late nineteenth-century English traveller), which describes ‘Matrimony’ as ‘filled with blancmange and flavoured with black currants.’ The dessert has a wonderfully suggestive history: its early recipes are tart, and have some bite; but in the 1950s they turn sweet and creamy. This is particularly interesting for Jamaican people’s preference in general for the taste of salt over sugar. In any case, among the young, ‘Matrimony’ now is unknown (as a dessert), and is hence considered obsolete.

The necessarily scant information given in this review gives some hint, I hope, of the potential miscellaneous and interdisciplinary uses of Higman’s book for further scholarship – in history, anthropology, food studies, garden studies, animal-human studies, ecology, studies of indigeneity (beyond the human), and importantly for my own interest, literary studies. Eating is much more than a necessity for survival; it is also an important aspect of social ritual and function. Eating practices are related to questions of self-image – as studies of eating disorders have shown – and are markers also of class and other formations of identity. Australian students today, reading Henry Handel Richardson’s *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, might easily mistake the eating of mutton in that novel as an indicator of low-class character, but that is a mistaken twenty-first century reading of nineteenth-century literature. We need to know something about the history of Australian food and eating not to make that mistake. Similarly, readers wishing to understand, say, the Jamaican poet, Lorna Goodison’s poetic, as expressed in ‘The Mango of Poetry’ (*Travelling Mercies*, 2001), could do much worse than consult Higman on the mango, which is arguably the island’s most popular fruit. In her recent memoir, *From Harvey River* (2007), Goodison makes the mango the fruit of origins and dreams. The mango was introduced to Jamaica from India, possibly via Brazil and Barbados (though most people think it came via Mauritius and St Domingue); but there is an indigenous anchovy pear, sometimes called the West Indian mango. This hints at the complex cultural resonances of both mango and pear. The section on fruits in *Jamaican Food* rightly omits the pear, for pears generally arrive in Jamaica in tins; and the index entry for ‘pear’ directs us to the chapter on the avocado – fruit of the ‘testicle tree’, according to the Aztecs, and later the Spanish. The English converted the Spanish *aguacate* to ‘avocado’, or ‘alligator pear’, though they generally regard it as a vegetable, best served in a salad. Jamaicans, reaching for an avocado from the tree, however, are knowingly reaching for a pear, and they bite into it directly, like a mango, a fruit. According to G. Llewellyn Watson’s *Jamaican Sayings* (1991), the avocado is associated with wrongdoing. As a warning against stubbornness or obstinacy, he records: ‘Ripe pear no know danger till mout’ ketch ’im.’ The mango is the more virtuous fruit, associated with thoroughness: ‘Wan bite cawn nyam mango’ (‘A mango cannot be eaten in one bite’). The star-apple too bears a moral burden, as might be inferred by Higman’s discussion of ‘Matrimony’, but it more like the pear, associated with evil rather than good. The star-apple withholds itself, refusing to fall from the tree after ripening, even to the point of rotting on the branch. Hence the saying: ‘Man cubba lakka star-apple’ (‘Man is covetous like star-apples’). Watson

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records also ‘Man two-face lakka star-apple’ (‘Man is two-faced like star-apples’, for the star-apple appears green on top (unripe) when it is purple underneath and ready for eating; hence its association with human hypocrisy).

The ‘Caribbean Review of Books’ included *Jamaican Food* among its best books of 2008. There were ten books on the list, ‘two novels, two books of poems, two anthologies, a biography, a memoir, an illustrated volume of art history, and one book that is hard to categorise’. The last one here is *Jamaican Food*, and while Higman’s usual box is history, he is on record saying ‘I find it quite satisfying that they couldn’t fit me into a box.’ The Association of American Publishers for Professional and Scholarly Excellence placed the book in the ‘Archaeology and Anthropology’ box, placing it among the finalists for publishing excellence in that category. The University of the West Indies Press is the youngest and newest publisher amongst the total finalists of all the prose categories, and is to be congratulated along with its author on producing such a beautiful as well as enjoyable and multi-functional scholarly book.

Russell McDougall