

## **Text For Dinner: Plain food in colonial Australia ...or was it?**

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In early 1888, Miss Margaret Pearson arrived in Melbourne under engagement to the Working Men's College there to give cookery lessons to young women. The College committee had applied to the National School of Cookery in London—an establishment effusively praised in the colonial press—for a suitable culinary educator, and Pearson, a graduate of that institute, was dispatched. After six months or so spent educating her antipodean pupils she published a cookbook, *Cookery Recipes For The People*, which she described in the preface as a handbook of “plain wholesome cookery” (Pearson 3). The book ran to three editions and sold more than 13,000 copies. A decade later, Hanna Maclurcan, co-proprietor of the popular Queen's Hotel in Townsville, published *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book: A Collection of Practical Recipes, Specially Suitable for Australia*. A review of this work in the *Brisbane Courier* described it, positively, as a book of “good plain cooking”. Maclurcan had gained some renown as a cook after the Governor of Queensland, Lord Lamington, publicly praised the meals he had eaten at the Queen's as “exceptionally good and above the average of Australian hotels” (*Morning Bulletin* 5). The first print run of *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book* sold out in weeks, and a second edition was swiftly produced. By 1903 there were 26,000 copies of Maclurcan's book in print—one of which was deposited in the library of Queen Victoria.

While the existence of any particular cookbook does not constitute evidence that any person ever reproduced a recipe from it, the not immodest sales enjoyed by Pearson and Maclurcan can, at the least, be taken to indicate a popular interest in the style of cookery, that is “plain cookery”, delineated in their respective works. If those who bought these books never actually turned them into working copies—that is, cooked from them—they likely aspired to do so. Practical classes in plain cookery were also popular in Australia in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The adjectival coupling of the word “plain” to “cookery” in colonial Australia can be seen then to have formed an appealing duet at that time

If a modern author or reviewer described the body of recipes encapsulated in a cookbook as “plain cookery”, it would not serve to recommend it to the contemporary market—indeed it would likely condemn such a publication to pulping, rather than sales of many thousands—as the term would be understood by most modern cooks, and eaters, to describe food that was dull and lacking in flavour and cosmopolitan appeal. We now prefer cookery books that offer instruction on the preparation of dishes that are described as “exotic”, “global”, “ethnic”, “seasonal”, “local”, and “full of flavour”, and that lend those that prepare and consume the dishes they contain the “glamour of culinary ethnicity” (Appadurai 10). It would seem to be stating the obvious then to say that “plain cookery” meant something entirely different to colonial Australians, except that modern Australians commonly believe that their nineteenth century brethren ate an “abominable”, “monotonous”, “low standard” diet (Santich, *The High and The Low* 37), and therefore if they preferred their meals to be plain cooked, that these would have been exactly as our present-day interpretation

would have them. Yet Pearson describes plain cookery as an “art” (3), arguably a rhetorical epithet, but she was a zealous educator and would not have used such a term to describe a style of cookery that she expected to turn out low quality dishes that were vile and dull.

What Pearson and Maclurcan actually present in their respective books is English cookery: this complete cuisine often described as ‘plain cookery’. The Anglo-Celtic population of Australia in the nineteenth century held varied opinions—ranging from obsequious to hateful—about England, depending on their background. The majority, however, considered it their natural home—including many who were colonial born—and the cultural model they reproduced, with local modifications, was that of the “mother country” (Abbott 10) some 10,000 long miles away. English political, legal, economic, and social systems were the foundation of white Australian society. In keeping with this, colonial cooks “perpetuated an English style of cookery, English food values, [and] an English meal structure” (Santich, *Looking for Flavour* 6) and English cookbooks were the models that colonial cooks and cookery writers drew upon.

When Polly, the heroine of Henry Handel Richardson’s novel *The Fortunes of Richard Mahoney*, teaches herself to make pastry from a cookbook in her rudimentary kitchen on the Victorian goldfields circa 1853, historical accuracy requires her to have employed an imported publication to guide her. It was another decade before the first Australian cookbook, Edward Abbott’s *The English And Australian Cookery Book*, was published in 1864. Prior to the appearance of Abbott’s work, colonial cooks wanting the guidance of a culinary manual were reliant on the imported English titles stocked by Australian booksellers, such as Eliza Acton’s *Modern Cookery for Private Families*, Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* and William Kitchiner’s *The Cook’s Oracle*. These three particular cookbooks were amongst the most successful and influential works in the nineteenth century Anglo-sphere and were commonly considered as manuals of plain cookery: Acton’s particular work is also the source of the most commonly quoted definition of “plain cookery” as “the principles of roasting, boiling, stewing and baking” (Acton 167) and I am going let it stand as the model of such in this piece.

If a curt literary catalogue, such as that used by Acton to delineate plain cookery, were used to describe any cuisine it would serve to make it seem austere, and the reputation of English food and cookery has likely suffered from a face value acceptance of it (and by association so has its Australian culinary doppelganger). A considered inspection of Acton’s work shows that her instructions for the plain methods of roasting, boiling, and stewing of food, cover 13 pages, followed by more than 100 pages of recipes for 19 different varieties of meat, poultry, and game that are further divided into numerous variant cuts. Three pages were dedicated to instruction for boiling potatoes properly. When preparing any of these dishes she enjoins her readers to follow the “slow methods of cooking recommended” (167) to ensure a superior end product. The principles of baking were elucidated across several chapters, taking under this classification the preparation of various types of pastry and a multitude of baked puddings, cakes and biscuits: all prepared from base

ingredients—not a packet harmed in their production. We now venerate the taste of so-called “slow cooked” food, so to discover that this was the method prescribed for producing plain cooked dishes suggests that plain cookery potentially had more flavour than we imagine. Acton’s work also challenges the charge that the product of plain cookery was monotonous. We have developed a view that we must have a multitudinous array of different types of food available, all year round, for it to be satisfactory to us. Acton demonstrates that variety in cookery can be achieved in other ways such as in types and cuts of meat, and that “plain” was not necessarily synonymous with sameness.

The celebrated twentieth century English food writer Elizabeth David says that *Modern Cookery* was the “most admired and copied English cookery book of the nineteenth century” (305). As the aspiration of most colonial cooks was the reproduction of English cookery it is not unreasonable to expect that Acton’s work might have had some influence on those that wrote cookery manuals for them. We know that Edward Abbott borrowed from her as he writes in his introduction that he has combined “the advantages of Acton’s work” (5) into this own. Neither Pearson or Maclurcan acknowledge any influence at all upon their works but their respective manuals are not particularly original in content—with the exception of some unique regional recipes in Maclurcan—and they must have drawn upon other cookery manuals of the same style to develop their repertoire. By the time they were writing, “large portions [of Acton’s] volume [had] been appropriated [by] contemporary [cookbook] authors [such as Abbott] without the slightest acknowledgment” (Acton 4): the famous Mrs. Beeton is generally considered to have borrowed heavily from Acton for the cookery section of her successful tome *Household Management*. If Pearson and Maclurcan did not draw directly on Acton—and they well might have—then they likely used culinary sources that had subsumed her influence as their inspiration.

What was considered to constitute plain cookery was not as straightforward as Acton’s definition; it was also “generally understood” to be free of any French influence (David 35). It was a commonly held suspicion amongst nineteenth century English men and women that Gallic cooks employed sauces and strong flavourings such as garlic and other “low and treacherous devices” (Saunders 4), to disguise the fact that they had such poor quality ingredients to work with. On the other hand, the English “had such faith” in the superior quality of their native produce that they considered it only required treatment with plain cookery techniques to be rendered toothsome: this culinary Francophobia persisted in the colonies. In the novel, *The Three Miss Kings*, set in Melbourne in 1880, the trio of the title take lodgings with a landlady, who informs them from the outset that she is “only a plain cook, and can’t make them French things which spile [sic] the stomach” (Cambridge 36). While a good plain cook might have defined herself by the absence of any Gallic, or indeed any other “foreign”, influence in the meals she created, there had been a significant absorption of elements of both of these in the plain cookery she practised, but these had become so far embedded in English cookery that she was unaware of it. A telling example of this is the unremarked inclusion of curry in the plain cookery cannon. While the name and homogenised form of this dish is of British invention, it retained

the varied spices, including pungent chillies, of the Indian cuisine it simulated. Pearson and Maclurcan, and Abbott, all included recipes for curries and curried dishes in their respective cookery books.

Over time, plain cookery seems to have become conflated with “plain food”, but the latter was not necessarily the result of the former. There was little of Pearson’s “art” involved in creating plain food, except perhaps an ability to keep this style of food so flavourless and dull that it offered neither pleasure nor temptation to eat any more than that required to sustain life. This very real plainness was actively sought by some as “plain food was synonymous with moral rectitude [...] and the plainer the food the more virtuous the eater” (Santich, *Looking* 28). A common societal appreciation of moral virtue is barely perceptible in modern Australian society but it was an attribute that was greatly valued in the nineteenth century Anglo-world and the consumption of plain food a necessary practice in the achievement of good character. (Our modern habit of labelling of foods “good” or “bad” shows that we continue to imbue food with moral overtones.) The list of “gustatory temptations” “proscribed by the plain food lobby” included “salt, spices, sauces and any flavourings that might have cheered the senses” (Santich, *Looking* 28). If this were the case then both Pearson and Maclurcan’s cookbooks would have dramatically failed to qualify as manuals of plain food. The recipes contained in their respective works feature a much greater use of components associated with flavour enhancement than we imagine to have been employed in plain cookery, particularly if we erroneously believe it to be analogous to plain food. Spices are used extensively in sweet and savoury dishes, as are various fresh green herbs and lemon juice and rind; homemade condiments such as mushroom ketchup (a type of essence pressed from a seasonal abundance of fungi), and a liberal employment of sherry, port, Madeira, and brandy that a “virtuous” plain food advocate would have considered most intemperate.

Pearson and Maclurcan both give instructions for preparing rich stocks and gravies drawn from meat, bones and aromatic vegetables, and prescribe the end product of this process as the foundation for a variety of soups, sauces, and stews. Recipes are given for a greater diversity of vegetables than the stereotyped cabbage and potatoes of colonial culinary legend. Maclurcan displays a distinct tropical regionalism in her book providing recipes that use green bananas and pawpaw as vegetables, alongside other exotic species—for that time—such as eggplant, choko, mango, granadilla, passionfruit, rosella, prickly pear, and guava. Her distinct location, the coastal city of Townsville, is also reflected in the extensive selection of recipes for local species of fish and seafood such as beche-de-mer, prawns, and barramundi, which won Maclurcan a reputation as an expert on seafood.

Ultimately, to gain a respectably informed understanding as to the taste, aroma, and texture of the plain cookery presented in the respective works of Pearson and Maclurcan one needs to prepare their recipes: I have done so, reproducing a wide selection of dishes from both books. Admittedly, I am a professionally trained cook with the skills to execute recipes to a high standard, but my practice is to scrupulously maintain the original listing of ingredients in the reproduction and follow the method as best I can. Through this practice I have made some delicious discoveries, which

have helped inform my opinion that some colonial Australians, and perhaps significant numbers of them, must have been eating meals that were a long way from dull, flavourless and monotonous.

It has been said that we employ our tongues for the “twin offices of rhetoric and taste” (Jaine 61). Words can exercise a significant influence on how we value the taste of—or actually taste—any particular food or indeed a cuisine. In the case of the popularly held opinion about the unappetizing state of colonial meals, it might be that the absence of rhetoric has contributed to this. Colonial food writers such as Pearson and Maclurcan did not “mince words” (Bannerman 166) and chose to use “plain titling” (David 306) and language that lacked the excessive adjectives and laudatory hyperbole typically employed by modern food writers. Perhaps if Pearson or Maclurcan had indulged in anointing their own works with enthusiastic recommendation and reference to international influences in their recipes, this might have contributed to a more positive impression of the food of our Anglo-Celtic ancestors. As an experiment with this idea I have taken a recipe from *Cookery Recipes For The People* and reframed its title and description in a modern food writing style. The recipe in question is titled “White Sauce” and Pearson writes that “this sauce will answer well for boiled fowl” (48): hardly language to make the dish sound appealing to the modern cook, and likely to confirm an expectation of plain cookery as tasteless and boring. But what if the recipe remained the same but the words used to describe it were changed, for example: the title to “Salsa Blanca” and the introductory remark to “this luxurious silky sauce infused with eschalot, mace, lemon, and sherry wine is perfect for perking up poached free-range chicken”. How much better might it then taste?

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