



Adult Learning Within Reach

Member Lecture – 27 May 2021

Mrs Beeton: the original Superwoman?
Margaret Mills, WEA tutor

Questions answered post-lecture

Q1 While English restaurants are now almost entirely (and uniquely) foreign, do you know why, unlike France, Italy, China etc. (where they eat their own food) the incredible wealth of British cooking has been left now as a curio?

A very interesting point! Wish I knew the answer, although I do think there are people out there doing what they can to promote British food (such as celebrity chefs and bloggers?), but it did acquire a poor reputation over the years. Maybe this had something to do with the reputation British cooking acquired during the Second World War and into the 1950's-60's. There were any number of jokes about the kind of food the British ate during the war and the strange recipes that were promoted by Government's ministry of food during food rationing (tasteless, dull, bland food in the main, which the population quickly realised needed to be adapted to be palatable). All with the dual aim of stimulating innovative ideas that 1) you COULD still eat well and be healthy even though certain foods were rationed, and 2) to try to keep up/raise the population's morale. I think this perception cast a long shadow over the reputation of British food, and that our food was second-rate to other countries, and therefore to be avoided if a foreign alternative was available.

You could also argue that the influences of America food and restaurant 'chains' needed to wane before any revival of English cuisine could take place.

Q2 From the publishing point of view today, by saying Mrs Beeton 'borrowed' recipes we mean 'plagiarised'? Did the contributors receive any credit?

As mentioned during the lecture, Mrs Beeton did not normally credit any of the contributors (although of course it wouldn't be possible to claim 100% that she never, ever did so on odd occasions). Patient research long after her death revealed that she used identical recipes from those documented earlier by Charles Francatelli, Hannah Glasse and Eliza Acton - and of course quite possibly others too. Family & friends contributed recipes (and perhaps were quite happy with not being credited), but she also utilised recipes sent in by readers of SO Beeton's magazines – notably the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, and as far as we know, the policy was not to credit. Copyright law was notoriously weak in the 19th century and a claim difficult to prove in court.

Q3 Is Nancy Spain's biography in print?

Try this one – **[A Trouser-Wearing Character: The Life and Times of Nancy Spain](#)** – Cassell, 1997.

I would suggest a library copy, the last time I checked it was expensive, even 2nd hand: May also be worth checking online or if there's anything on Youtube?

Useful links and further reading

[Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management](#) – Isabella Beeton, 1861

[The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton](#) – Kathryn Hughes, 2006

Forthcoming courses by Margaret Mills

[Queen Victoria's Children: Alice, the Tragic Princess \(C2227949\)](#) - 12th June 2021,

[Queen Victoria's Children: Alfred, \('Affie'\), A Life on the Ocean Wave \(C2227946\)](#) - 26th June 2021

[Jane Austen – The Austen Family \(C2228153\)](#) - 4th July 2021,

[Queen Victoria's Children: Helena, a Dutiful Daughter \(C2227952\)](#) - 10th July 2021