

Essay Reviews

Has the *Companion* a Future?

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Kenneth Kiple and Kriemhild Coneè Ornelas (eds), *The Cambridge world history of food*, 2 vols, Cambridge University Press, 2000, total pages 2,153, illus., £110.00 (hardback 0-521-40216-6).

Nobody could deny that the *Cambridge world history of food* is a bargain. For £110 the purchaser gets 2150 pages, with 224 contributors from 15 different countries. The six main parts are devoted to what our ancestors ate, staple foods, dietary liquids, the nutrients, food around the world, history of nutrition and health and contemporary policy issues. The text concludes with a 176-page dictionary of world plant foods; the two volumes are printed on good paper, the pages open easily, and the relatively large typeface of the index makes for easy legibility.

The portents, then, are good, and are often realized by the excellent handling of the diverse themes. The introductory articles by the editors (one of whom, Kenneth F Kiple, of Bowling Green State University, also edited the *Cambridge world history of disease*) are among the exemplars, and other outstanding essays include those on the history of brewing, breast-feeding, famine, rice, coffee, and potatoes. Some topics are unexpected: the importance of food lobbies, foods as aphrodisiacs, and the psychology of food and food choice. And current controversies, such as the role of fat in atherosclerosis, or salt in hypertension, are well dealt with in a balanced way. The reader who stays the course will realize the continual evolution of globalization of food throughout history, and will hardly doubt

another of the work's major themes: that every important agricultural breakthrough so far has had unhappy consequences for health. And he or she will have encountered a lively succession of facts, and often as comprehensive a coverage as is required.

Collectors of the arcane or the fatuous will also have a field day. Naples, for example, was the last major city to rely on pigs to dispose of its night soil. In the 1830s, the annual consumption of spirits in the USA reached a peak of over 5 gallons per capita, while currently every day each member of the Buganda people consumes 4–4.5 kg of bananas. The Aztecs ate the arms and legs of their victims with a chimole sauce not dissimilar to today's *salsa mexicana*. Research in Helsinki has shown that the most annoying social odours are sweat and alcohol; the least, garlic and aftershave. And, in the nineteenth century, Oxford ditched an outstanding oarsman on the grounds that his vegetarianism might corrupt the rest of the boat crew.

All this, then, might add up to an overwhelming success for this *History*. Regrettably, it does not: much in the two volumes points, rather, to the editors having been overwhelmed. For the abiding impression is of quixotic prolixity, of sheer wordiness, of excessive duplication but also vital omissions, and, crucially, sometimes the partial or even total absence of *any* history of the subject under consideration. Such might seem a cruel conclusion, but the

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stakes are high, and a book with such potential has to be judged by the most rigorous of standards.

The responsibility, I believe, does not lie with the editors. The English politician Rab Butler was famous for his statement that all political lives end in failure, and much the same inevitability could be applied to anthologies. In particular, the idea so prevalent among publishers that a comprehensive text with uniformly high standards can be funded on a shoestring, so that ordinary readers can afford to buy it, is erroneous. Something has to give, whether production or intellectual standards, or both. As the editor of a recent, if less ambitious, project (the *Oxford illustrated companion to medicine*), I encountered similar but fewer problems to the ones so evident in the Cambridge volumes. At times I came to wonder whether the idea of extending Butler's concept was not correct: the whole basis of a companion is outdated because of the inherent difficulties. I have since concluded that it is not: those needing a short, clear exposition of, say, counterpoint or structuralism can get just what they want from the accounts in *The Oxford companion to music* or *English literature*. Nevertheless, editors need to be far more ruthless in rejecting articles that do not meet the criteria, sub-editors need to be far more exacting in filleting the meat from the bones, and publishers need to be prepared to pay for what is truly an expensive process (which includes generous fees for articles commissioned hurriedly to fill a gap, for not skimping illustrations, and for the costs of updating accounts at the last moment).

The editors of the Cambridge *History* anticipate some of these complaints. "These volumes", they say, "were never intended to comprise an encyclopaedia but rather to be a collection of original essays. Therefore the chapters are far from uniform, and at times there is overlap between them, which was encouraged so that each essay could stand alone without cross-referencing. . . . Our

authors . . . were given considerable latitude in their style of presentation." Yet nothing in the title suggests this approach, and surely over 1,700 pages is too generous a space for a collection of essays. And, again and again, the content of the articles belies the book's title. Laissez-faire has resulted in one table of six pages documenting algae, and another of seven, fungi, neither with any obvious relevance and certainly no historical implication (though elsewhere one of three pages does justify the format by documenting the details of the oldest cultivation of the spices). Parts of the book read like a contemporary textbook of nutrition, yet elsewhere the treatment is woefully out of date. The chapter on bovine spongiform encephalopathy states that there is a debate on whether this disease can spread from animals to man. The author's latest reference is dated 1991, yet by the time of publication (2000) there had been almost 100 cases of new variant Creutzfeldt-Jacob disease, and his whole treatment of an important paradigm shift in our thinking about disease transmission is inadequate. Surely the editors should have intervened here, and elsewhere, to ensure that accounts were as comprehensive and as up to date as possible. (In our work we were fortunate that Oxford University Press allowed us to update the proofs as late as three months before publication.) Just how old are some of the articles and how long did the book's progress take from delivery of the manuscript to publication? Moreover, one article in the *History* stands out as inappropriate for a book aimed at generalists: the way-out hypothesis by Seeley about the role of calcium in myocardial infarction. To be sure, speculation has an important role in science, but its place is not in a broadly-based book but in a journal devoted to hypotheses (where, indeed, Seeley has already documented his thoughts).

The sub-editing has not been nearly as ruthless as it should have been. Phrases that normally make editors reach for their red

pens have been left (“It is noteworthy in this respect that . . .”), as have some grammatical solecisms (“comprised of”), and many essays could have been halved in length. The complexity of language varies considerably among the essays: some are written in lay-friendly terms, others need a dictionary to be understood by those not in the specialty. Again, much duplication could have been excised if cross-referencing had been introduced (for example, for pellagra). Yet, as again the editors acknowledge, cross-referencing is present only in the final section, although other publications (most notably the *Companion encyclopedia of the history of medicine*, edited by W F Bynum and Roy Porter) have shown how unobtrusively and constructively it can be applied throughout a major book. Conversely, some major historical discussions are virtually absent—cholera, for example, whose history demanded a treatment as full as in the splendid account of scurvy. Nor does the reader get much help from the skimpy (but bulky) indexes. In checking my own statements, I found that some (for example, the Aztecs and their sauce) were not in the Subject Index and I had to rely on my notes. Two of the major arguments encountered throughout the book are Thomas McKeown’s on the decline of infections and the Trowell-Burkitt fibre hypothesis, yet anybody relying on the Index of Names would miss some of the important discussions.

As I found with the Oxford *Companion*, problems with this genre of publication abound. First, one has to anticipate criticisms by trying to include every topic. (In our extensive preliminary discussions on the Oxford volume we considered ourselves smart to think of the Black Box and Zombification—but forgot to devote a separate article to depression.) Then the editor has to persuade the right person to deal with a subject, and to keep to both the suggested outline and the deadline. How can these aims be ensured? There is precious little payment or academic kudos from such

writing, and what should an editor do when the article fails to achieve its objective? (He or she can either reject the article, trying to find another author at the last minute, or negotiate for its revision, or—the all-too-usual solution—settle for things as they are, as has so obviously happened with the *Cambridge History*, and I must admit also occurred with the *Companion*.) How can one ensure some sort of uniformity of approach, where authors routinely use a structure that includes a balanced conclusion and up-to-date references? How does an editor guarantee that an author will not repudiate a version that has undergone the sort of creative editing associated with *The New Yorker*, but alas these days so rare with our academic publishing houses? How far should he or she use peer review of commissioned articles, with its potential for disagreements and delays? How, again, can a publisher afford the sort of illustrations needed to enliven the page: the first volume of the *Cambridge History* has some acceptable line drawings, mostly of plants, but the second is a visual desert? (One reviewer of our *Companion* has already commented on the large number of illustrations from other OUP books, another on the “astonishingly poor quality of some of the illustrations”—though with galleries now charging up to £500 to reproduce a single image it is difficult to see an alternative.) How, finally, can publishers find editors to shoulder the tremendous amount of work and personal stress entailed, given that most of their work has to be done in their spare time and they are paid usually wholly through subsequent royalties?

Despite such caveats, I believe, given the right format for every individual article, which is enforced, together with painstaking sub-editing, that rigour and readability can be assured for *Companion*-type publications, and that the labour will become fun again for editors. Inevitably, however, such books will become far more expensive, and possibly even uneconomic to produce. For

my ideal historical compendium, the *Dictionary of National Biography*, authors are given a clear pattern, which has to be followed, and the subsequent editorial process is unusually meticulous. The result is far from bland uniformity (as see the accounts), but a backdrop of facts in their accustomed place together with individuality where it is appropriate, in the section evaluating a person's contribution. There is no reason why such a model could not be applied widely to other genres of books (though, admittedly, the *DNB* has a considerable financial subsidy and a generous staffing of experts).

Whatever the future of compendiums (which clearly has to involve the Web), in recommendations for the present publication I have to fall back on the old cliché: this *History* is too flawed for the individual to purchase, but parts of it are too noteworthy not to be on the shelves of every library. I wish, though, that the editors had sat down for a couple of months and distilled all the facts in this book into a compulsively readable account of 200 pages. They would have needed to add material quite often, but the result, which they are clearly capable of, would have been a masterpiece.

The History of British General Practice

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Anne Digby, *The evolution of British general practice, 1850–1948*, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. xiv, 376, illus., £48.00 (hardback 0-19820513-9).

Irvine Loudon, John Horder and Charles Webster (eds), *General practice under the National Health Service 1948–1997*, London, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. xxix, 329, £50.00 (hardback 0-19-820675-5).

The preface to the second volume reviewed here provides the essential map to this particular history of British general practice. A small committee, meeting in 1991, agreed to pursue the publication of a history of general practice; Loudon had already published his *Medical care and the general practitioner* covering the years 1750 to 1850, so it was decided to make a trilogy of it with a further two volumes. The start date of 1850 clearly had to follow from Loudon's work. The end date was to be 1997—taking events right up to

publication—and the date in the middle, to split these two books from each other, was chosen as 1948.

These decisions were important because they informed much beyond the simple time span of each of the histories. Choosing 1948, for instance, as the turning point between both books might be seen as curious. Certainly there was a major change in the way health care was provided in 1948 with the advent of the National Health Service (though how big a change for the health of the population and for clinical practice, especially after the war-time Emergency Medical Services, remains debatable). Yet did 1948 figure largely in the

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