‘whiche thynge ye welchmen heryng ran out of heuyn a gret pace.’ How food stories construct a national identity, or how roasted cheese lured the Welsh out of heaven

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‘whiche thynge ye welchmen heryng ran out of heuyn a gret pace.’
How food stories construct a national identity, or how roasted cheese lured the Welsh out of heaven.

Sally Linsell

May 2022

Module A329 The Making of Welsh History.

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1 A. C. Mery Talys (London, 1526)
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Dedication.

For my wonderful dad - Tony Linsell. I have loved your stories since ‘Alfred and Judy’ and you have inspired me to tell my own.
Introduction

“… the present work is intended for the especial benefit of those of gentle birth who may not have any very extensive knowledge of economy in domestic practice.”

Food matters: at its most basic form it is the means to survive, but more than this, food has been woven into culture ever since humans transitioned to a society of production. Historians have tucked food into their presentations of the past, but for enthusiastic scholars, food warrants considerably more attention. Food culture allows the historian to uncover hidden levels of meaning in social relationships and arrive at new understandings of the human experience; clearly such a captivating subject deserves serious consideration. This dissertation seeks to explore how a national narrative can be shaped around food. Scholarly Welsh food historiographies are lacking and examining the legitimacy of Wales’ culinary heritage will both add to this and challenge the actuality.

Wales has a notable history of invasion, immigration, puritanical religion and industrial hardship; and as a cultural artefact food can bridge this divergence and unite those who consider themselves Welsh. Whether any nation can claim a base ingredient to be unique or even indigenous is debatable, and the prevailing geographical and climatic pattern of many countries results in a similitude of raw materials. The claim to ownership lies in the preparation and social significance of these foods. National cuisines are dynamic; progress alone changes cooking methods or the availability of ingredients, and the national branding of

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a cuisine must manage a relationship between past and present whilst still claiming authenticity.

As the field of Food History has grown, research broadens, with the aim of interpreting the meaning of culinary habits. A thematic approach is found in the series of essays that make up *The Oxford Handbook of Food History*. Many contributors are historians, with the aim of consolidating food history as an academic field and establishing areas for further research. Other publications aiming at comprehensive contributions include *The Cambridge World history of food* and Spencer’s *British food: an extraordinary thousand years of history* which dismisses the culinary limits of geographical isolation by exploring one thousand years of conquest, colonisation and immigration. The concern with encyclopaedic attempts at food histories is that, with such a broad scope, they risk echoing widely held opinions without testing verisimilitude. Food historian Reay Tannehill wrote a slimmer tome in 1973, succinctly picking out relevant history from prehistoric to a more contemporary age, likewise Clarissa Dickson Wright provides an abundance of absorbing facts with a *History of English Food*, much of which is also applicable to Wales. Welsh food specifically occupies just a fraction of the literature on British food history. Bobby Freeman’s excellent guide to Welsh food and its history is the main publication appertaining to Wales and the author reveals that previously nothing similar had been attempted, and she was chastised for the ‘frivolity’ of her proposition.

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6 Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (London,2008)
8 Bobby Freeman, *First catch your peacock* (Talybont, 1996), p.6
Cookbooks can be the humble literature of complex societies and are neglected as information sources. For early recipes *The Forme of Cury* is a rare example of a fourteenth-century collection of British food, however looking earlier still and specifically at Welsh food, a cross-disciplinary approach is necessary. Mentions of regional food can be found in the 12th century accounts of Giraldus, and Enid Roberts’ *Food of the Bards* reveals the secrets of the medieval kitchens in the great houses of Wales between 1350 and 1650. The herbal lore of Meddygon Myddfai represents a loosely collected list of medieval restorative recipes incorporating magical formulas and incantations which suggest a syncretism with pagan rituals. Tudor writers bolster the image of a customary Welsh love of cheese including revelations in Andrew Boorde’s ‘introduction of knowledge’ and *A. C. Mery Talys*. George Borrow’s *Wild Wales* is a Victorian dialogic text rich with moments of insight into the social eating habits of the Welsh and Lady Llanover’s *The First Principles of Good Cookery* is an authentic if eccentric nineteenth-century Welsh cookbook with the author notable for her willingness to express views diametrically different from her peers. These primary sources are useful to showcase the written literature available for a chronologically wide-ranging overview of food throughout Welsh history, and for general commentary. They are not all exclusively food journals but add to a review on food origins when studied in their social context, although basic family foods are frequently neglected.

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10 Glyn Hughes, *The Forme Of Cury*. (Derbyshire, 2016)
12 Enid Roberts, *Food of the Bards*, (Cardiff, 1982).
14 Andrew Boorde, *The Fyrst Boke Of the Introduction Of Knowledge Made By Andrew Borde ... A Compendyous Regyment Or a Dyetary Of Helth Made In Mountpyllier, Compyled By Andrewe Boorde ... Barnes In the Defence Of the Berde: a Treatyse Made, Answerynge the Treatyse Of Doctor Borde Vpon Berdes*, (Dublin, 1870).
15 A. C. Mery Talys (London, 1526)
17 Llanover, *The First Principles of Good Cookery*.
Re-dressing the balance, the 1928 Welsh Eisteddfod award-winning entry by Mati Thomas, is a written remembrance of recipes passed down over centuries. Similarly, Minwel Tibbott travelled through Wales in 1969 talking to the older generation of women and recording recipes harking back to the 1800s; both are a reminder of the importance of oral testimony. The archivists at the National Museum Wales provided helpful additional details, via personal correspondence, regarding the fieldwork of Tibbott, including sound-bites from the original interviews. Website resources such as St Fagans and Taste Wales have information on the history of Welsh fare, and cross-disciplinary research can unearth mentions of Welsh foods and culinary practices, even if incidental to the main body of text.

There has been a further body of Welsh cookery books in recent years, and in keeping with contemporary fashion, the authors have often included a brief synopsis of the provenance of a dish; in contrast to the earlier primary sources, there is now an emphasis on every-day or working-class foods. The challenge has been to pinpoint those foods that were worthy of mention in earlier historical materials and have remained well-known throughout the early twentieth and twenty first centuries. There is a range of uncommon curiosities, from the medieval sugared-swan to the twentieth-century goose blood pudding, but by reading into social context, noticing frequent mention, and deciphering unwitting testimony, a common theme can often be found.

The value of oral testimony and use of memory in the shaping of tradition has been examined extensively. Schwyzer examines how the Welsh have used the repertoire of

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18 Mati Thomas, Ryseitiau Coginiol, (Newquay, 1928).
19 Minwel Tibbott, Welsh Fare (Wales, 1991), Minwel Tibbott, Domestic Life in Wales (Cardiff, 2002)
collective memory to make up for a shortage of surviving written history and Said 22 examines the concern of memory creating a desirable past and a manipulated national narrative. Further secondary sources will focus on exploration of food as cultural heritage 23 and include an anthropological approach 24. These are general studies, often focusing upon European experiences but are applicable to the development of the Welsh national identity. The relationship between food and national identity has been studied in numerous academic articles looking at the discourse of authenticity and the emotion evoked by foodscapes. 25 In recent years the Welsh government have used the concept of traditional food to support tourism and heritage, and commercial or policy choices provide useful context for contemporary accounts 26.

The scarcity of literature devoted to the notable interrelation between Welsh food and Welsh national identity suggests a research gap for this dissertation. There is not the scope to reprise the specific notions around gender issues allied with domestic fare, or fully explore social and ceremonial rituals around Welsh culinary culture, and these topics warrant future research. The limits of capacity also necessitate the discussion of a only a selection of Welsh foods: the abundance of the country has been plentiful, and there are regional particularities, so inevitably favourites have been omitted; there is undoubtedly opportunity for future comprehensive works. For the sake of clarity, this dissertation is divided into two parts. Chapter 1 considers historical representations of Welsh food to establish what might be considered authentic Welsh cuisine. This is, necessarily, an extended review, and does not

23 Ronda Brulotte and Michael Di Giovine, Edible identities: food as cultural heritage. (Farnham, 2014).
confine itself to a particular historical period, led instead by the availability of literature. The eligibility of the foods as authentic is open to dispute and influenced by the bias and background of the sources but evidenced as far as possible. Chapter 2 looks at the purpose of collective and cultural memory in creating this identity and the value of oral history and remembrance. It will consider how history can be used for commercial purposes with nostalgia employed to solicit a memory of loss never actually experienced, what Appadurai characterises as ‘armchair nostalgia’. From this initial exploration of culinary kinship, the conclusion will consider whether Welsh food heritage is a manipulated or imagined concept or whether it is naturally shaped and maintained by repurposing the past.

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Chapter 1. Bwyd y Beirdd, Food of the Bards.

‘How’s it above? … Is there rum and laverbread?’ 28

The Welsh have not provided an abundance of literature pertaining to their food and historically there was probably no urgency; for the poor, the primary concern was to conquer hunger, and for the pious to prove abstinence, making food necessary for survival but not noteworthy. By its nature, much of the food described in earlier periods was essentially aristocratic and correspondingly the enthusiasm of the Welsh bards for the feasts of their time have provided what Bobby Freeman encapsulates as a ‘Welsh ‘good food’ guide to the halls of the castles and mansion of the day’. 29 According to these medieval poets, meat was an essential part of every spread and an astounding array of beasts, fish and fowl littered the table, including ‘Comely peacocks and beautiful swans.’ 30 Spices, sugar, flowers, and mead scented and flavoured a variety of courses, and fruit and vegetables were offered in abundance, washed down with wine and ale. 31 This fine fare of the wealthy was a display of power more than an homage to good food. The food of the medieval majority was eaten by farming folk and peasants and remained relatively intact throughout the following centuries.

Hardship and locality limited the breadth of food available, although this did not subdue the generosity of the householder. Medieval travel accounts such as that written by Gerald of Wales in the late twelfth-century, described the Welsh as sober people, who fasted from morning to evening, eating only a simple and scanty meal a day; the more pressing

28 Dylan Thomas, Under Milk Wood (Project Gutenberg, 2015).
29 Freeman, first catch Your Peacock, p.281
30 Roberts, Food of the Bards, (Y Rug, Raff ap Robert)
31 Roberts, Food of the Bards
employment being the slaying of hostile marauders. However, the arrival of the weary stranger would invariably pre-empt entertainment, and the offer of food, even if the host had to go without. Centuries later in 1872, George Borrow discovered that this hospitable welcome towards the friendly stranger persisted. Arriving in a rural hamlet, a local miller invited him in to share a meal. Borrow was served a very sparse fare of tea, bread and butter, and some thin slices of ‘brown, watery cheese’. Despite the obvious hardship and no kinship to their unfamiliar guest, Borrow recalls the miller’s wife taking a basin out of the cupboard and proudly presenting him alone, with two precious lumps of sugar. The generosity and welcome of the family, rather than the contents of the meal, is the more remarkable detail of the account, and a reminder of the extraordinary power of food to traverse social boundaries.

The traditional diet of the poor was based upon bread, in particular barley, and oats; a home grown crop of oats was invaluable to every farmer and the staple crop of rural Wales. After the oats had been dried and hulled, the kernels were crushed finely and sifted to remove any husks; the material left on the sieve was known as sucan meal. Sucan was a dish prepared by the women and then commonly eaten with milk during an early twentieth-century harvest midday meal. Once the sucan had been boiled to a specific consistency, ‘the sucan must drop from the stick like a cow’s tail’, it was set to cool in large tin pans whilst the cook solicitously observed the surface of the dish. A smooth surface was testimony to her skill, and warranted praise, but a cracked surface invited mockery and meant the maiden who cooked it was destined to ‘marry an ugly fellow!’ Tibbott tells of a similar dish known as

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32 Giraldus, *The Description of Wales*. p.10
33 Giraldus, *The Description of Wales* p.11
34 Borrow, *Wild Wales*, p.103
35 Spencer, *British Food*, p.199
36 Tibbott, *Welsh Fare*, p.54
37 ‘rhaid I’r sucan ddisgyn o’r pren fel cwt buwch’ Tibbott, *Welsh Fare*, p.54
38 Tibbott, *Domestic Life in Wales*, P.7
llymru, made in the counties of North Wales, with the common addition of buttermilk during the cooking process; llymru was economical and filling, although the pallid fare was ‘good for nothing. But to fill the belly and suppress hunger’. With oats, alongside barley, being the primary crop of rural Wales, a succession of oat-based dishes were monotonous but inevitable. Oat gruel, consisting of milk, water, salt, and sugar was used both as invalid food, and for mothers of new-born babies for its milk producing qualities, likewise sucan with added ginger, butter and sugar was accorded with similar virtues in Carmarthenshire. The humble oat made a regular appearance across Wales with a few regional variations in name, texture, and flavourings. According to Lady Llanover, whose watch word was economy, its thrift and versatility rendered it the ‘staff of life’ to rural Wales.

For coastal dwellers there was an aquatic source of nourishment. Shellfish gathering, along with the collection of seaweed, is one of the oldest of human foraging activities, and Wales is blessed with a long-ranging coastline. Remains of a Palaeolithic man, first mistakenly thought to be female and named ‘The Red Lady’, were found in the Paviland Caves on the Gower’s south coast. Analysis showed that his diet contained significant aquatic protein such as fish, molluscs and seabirds, and further isotopic data in South Wales has shown that Mesolithic humans there also had predominantly marine diet. If a nation’s cuisine was based solely on the earliest known food to be consumed in a local region, then this would be a strong contender. Much of the prehistoric British coastline is now submerged,

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39 Tibbott, *Welsh Fare*, p.53
40 Tibbott, *Welsh Fare*, p.57
but what is clear is that coastal resources have sustained human life over long periods. Certainly, by the medieval period if not much earlier, the distinctive figures of the shellfish women emerged on the Welsh coast; they were often assisted by their children, and after foraging for shellfish, they either sold them on the shore or travelled inland for considerable distances with their wares. 44 The writer H.V. Morton happened upon the cockle women of Gower in 1932, sitting with their wares in Swansea market, ‘looking as though they were waiting for Rembrandt to come and paint them’45, these foragers were later described by Dylan Thomas as ‘webfoot cocklewomen’46. These ‘cocklewomen’ would walk from Penrhyndeudaeth to Porthmadog to sell cockles, knocking on doors and dancing, they would sing ‘Cockles and eggs, Thin oat cakes, The girls of Penrhyn, Doing the shakes!’ 47

In the early twentieth-century during summer months, it was not uncommon to see whole families on the beaches in the moonlight, digging for sand eels.48 There was an unwritten rule that neither winkles should be eaten, nor limpets collected, if the letter r was not included in the name of the month in English; in reality this incorporates fair ecological practice to allow for spawning and seasonality.49 As befits a country with miles of coastline and fast-running rivers, the fishing industry has been well-established and renowned in Wales for centuries. In an unflattering cartoon published by William Dicey of London in 1747, a caricature of a Welsh man with a leek in his hat is depicted riding a goat, closer inspection shows there to be a herring tucked into his saddlebag.50 Indeed, until the first decade of the

45 O’Connor, Imagine and Consuming the Coast, p.134.
46 Dylan Thomas, Under Milk Wood.
47 ’Cocos a way, Bara cerch tana, Merched y Penrhyn, Yn ysgwyd ‘u tina!’ Minwel Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p.68.
48 Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p.66.
49 Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p.67.
twentieth-century, herring fishing, was a vital industry in the coastal villages of Cardigan Bay.\footnote{Geraint Jenkins, ‘The Customs of Welsh Fishermen’, \textit{Folklore}, 83(1), (1972), p.2.} It usually began in September as soon as the arrival of the herring shoals had been signalled by the cry of a bird known as Guto Gruglwyd, and it continued until late November when the herring would be cured by the fisherman’s wives who would chop salt off big blocks and scatter it between the layers of herring in casks.\footnote{Jenkins, The customs of Welsh Fisherman, p.2, Peter Williams, \textit{The Herring run}, (2019) \url{https://www.peoplescollection.wales/story/1251216/}} The resulting salted herring were said to be particularly good served with bread and butter or baked potatoes.\footnote{Tibbott, \textit{Welsh Fare}, p.70}

Salmon and sea trout have also always been a highly regarded feature of Welsh food. The trout is still widely referred to as the ‘Sewin’: an old Welsh name possibly meaning ‘the silver or shining one’.\footnote{Carwyn Jones, Opening Address 1 Sea Trout: A Welsh Perspective in \textit{Sea Trout: Biology, Conservation and Management}, ed. by Graeme Harris and Nigel Milner (Oxford, 2006) p.xiii-xvi. This may also be a reference to the silver colour of the trout once they reach an age when they can cope with both salt and fresh water. See \textit{Sea Trout} \url{https://www.wildtrout.org/content/sea-trout} for example.} Prior to the twentieth-century, sea birds and their eggs were considered fair game for coastal foragers, and puffins continued to be much prized for their meat in North Wales into the later nineteenth-century, either eaten fresh or pickled\footnote{John Baldwin, ‘Harvesting Seabirds and their Eggs on the Irish Sea Islands (Part 1: The Welsh Islands, Lundy and Scilly)’, \textit{Folk life}, 47(1), (2009) p.92}. A nineteenth-century account of egg collection from cliff tops affords a glimpse into a world before health and safety, and a fair indication of why this practice no longer takes place. A man would tie a rope around his body, fasten this to a stake he had knocked into the cliff top and dangle over the summit of the rockface. It was duly noted that ‘This is a dangerous employment, and there are several instances on record, where from the rope slipping… lives have been lost, and the mangled bodies buried in the sea’.\footnote{Baldwin, ‘Harvesting Seabirds and their Eggs’ p. 92}
Despite the coastal bounty, Welsh society is by tradition ‘essentially a pastoral one’ and there was a thriving market for Welsh livestock. Anglesey cattle swam the Menai strait in the Middle Ages as part of their journey to Barnet Fair, Welsh lamb and beef were well-known for their quality as ‘the best native breeds in Great Britain’ and Lady Llanover sang the praises of real Welsh mutton ‘admitted by all epicures…to be the very finest flavour’ With the confidence of her rank and status, she also expressed concern about the mistreatment of farmed animals in particular ‘the evils of artificial fattening of cattle’. The easy-to-keep animal of the poor was the pig; slaughtering was carried out as a community activity with the tradition of a large glass of brandy from the local pub provided to the butcher prior to each kill. Every part of the pig was used and faggots, traditionally made from the pig’s liver are still a popular dish. Tibbott describes a typical plate of faggots as ‘swimming in gravy’, and this humble sauce is frequently mentioned in accounts of Welsh food and thus deserves a place in this appraisal. Lady Llanover, in particular, is keen to ensure her readers are aware that a ‘great deal of extra gravy’ is a necessary part of Welsh cookery

Native cattle, goats and sheep allowed for an abundance of dairy products. Cheese was a prominent part of the Welsh diet, to the point of Tudor merriment and literal notoriety. Andrew Boorde, an English Tudor Physician, mentions the Welsh fondness for roasted cheese in his First Booke of the introduction of knowledge; ‘I am a Welshman and do dwel in Wales … I do loue cawse boby, good rosted chese’ This passion for dairy runs further than

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57 Freeman, *First Catch your peacock*, p.35
58 Spencer, *British food*, p.204
59 Llanover, *The First Principles of good cookery*, p.205
60 Llanover, *The First Principles of good cookery*, p.204, Spencer, *British food*, p203
64 Llanover, *The First Principles of good cookery*, p.397
65 Boorde, *The First Booke*, p.126
fondness though, as suggested in ‘Tale 78’ of A. C Mery Tales, a Tudor book of comedic anecdotes. Accordingly, God had allowed a great many ‘Welchemen’ into heaven, who had behaved in a generally disorderly manner; exasperated by this disturbance, God set St Peter the task of evicting them. St Peter, in full knowledge of the weakness of the Welsh palate, stood outside the gates of heaven loudly calling out ‘Cause bobe’. A stampede of Welshmen exited heaven in search of their preferred delicacy, at which point St Peter went back inside and ‘locked the dore’. Whether this revered food is the provenance of Welsh Rarebit is unclear, but this again is another cheesy contrivance of some infamy, not least the debate over its etymology. The earliest cited use of the term ‘Welsh rabbit’ was in 1725, with its alternative form ‘rarebit’, which ‘has no meaning aside from this dish’,

With its simplest form being roasted cheese and bread, Welsh rarebit was not only a favourite but a frugal dish. Lady Llanover had a motto hanging above her kitchen doorway

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66 A C Mery Tales, Tale 78.
67 ‘roasted cheese’ A C Mery Tales, Tale 78.
68 A C Mery Tales, Tale 78
which read ‘Thrift is beneficial to all and is the father of wealth’. In keeping with this sentiment, remembrances of traditional Welsh food have an underlying theme of wasting nothing, and some of Wales’s best known dishes originate from this principle. Cawl is a broth or soup with no direct translation, but a meal within itself and an ‘unspoken part of life, so much so that nobody could say, consciously, how it was made’; a paradox for any food-writer who wants to share an authentic Welsh recipe. Jane Grigson claims that to give a recipe for cawl is an ‘artificial thing to do’ because each cook used whatever was to hand to make their own variation. Spencer describes it as a moveable feast that improved in flavour over the course of a few days. Plainly, cawl is the essence of a much loved, and economical family dish and mentioned frequently in oral remembrances of Welsh food. This prudent attitude towards making a meal out of leftovers, extended into baking. A common baking day custom was to keep a small quantity of dough and use it as a base for a currant loaf cake, such as Bara Brith, although economy necessitated just the addition of a ‘little lard, sugar and a few currants to make this treat’. Basic, versatile cakes, such as Teisen Lap, were baked for miners as a tuck box staple, their moist texture preventing them from crumbling.

Colin Spencer attempted to make a list of traditional Welsh foods but admitted it could not possibly be comprehensive after he had detailed over one hundred. The dishes described although familiar, are not necessarily remarkable. They are mainly store-cupboard foods, and the ingredients are not found solely in Wales, and could be replicated with commonly grown ingredients in another geographical area. Nature was in charge in the

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73 Freeman, First Catch Your Peacock, p.17
74 Freeman, First Catch Your Peacock, p.106
76 Spencer, British Food, p.205
77 See for example Thomas, Ryseitiau Coginiol and Tibbot, Welsh Fare.
78 Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p.45
79 Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p.37
80 Spencer, British Food, pp.352-354
earlier days, and the food available was local and seasonal; the ingredients tell us about the
construction of a society at a particular point in time, but the provenance of heritage dishes
begins in the preparation of the food, and the social rituals behind this. There are scant
records of written recipes before the mid eighteenth-century, and household books contained
mainly medicinal remedies and domestic instruction. Historically cookbooks were restricted
in their audience to an elite segment of society that was literate and could access the printed
word.81 Hannah Glasse attempted to write a book of domestic recipes suitable for the lower
sort and with thrift in mind The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy in 1747, but was
subject to a vitriolic attack by a contemporary cook and author, appropriately named Ann
Cook, who found this new approach unseemly.82 However, books alone can neither contain
the essence nor guarantee the survival of national life. “Texts are fragile things, vulnerable to
flames, bookworms, and appropriative readings”83, so there needs to be another way.

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82 Andrew, Monnickendam, “Ann Cook Versus Hannah Glasse: Gender, Professionalism and Readership in the
83 Schwyzer, *Literature, nationalism, and memory*, p.95.
Chapter 2. Hiraeth

‘in fact, one symptom of homesickness is an irrational and hopeless craving for a plate of bacon and bara lawr.’ ⁸⁴

Schwyzer suggests that for sixteenth-century Welsh scholars, their nation’s history had the ‘appearance of a succession of bibliocauts’ ⁸⁵. The humanist William Salesbury suggests that the bards saw a bright side to this destruction of books, as the ‘phantastical vanities of theyr prophecies’ ⁸⁶ could not be challenged and this allowed them to shape the narrative over the Welsh historical memory. By happy chance, in the Historiae Brytannicae defensio, Price reassures his readers that historical testimony will not be forgotten, referring to the remarkable skill of the Welsh for preserving their past and praising their specific arts of memory ⁸⁷. In actuality, any written form of culinary history may have been peculiarly untranslatable; common cooking ingredients and techniques were so rarely transcribed that a best guess had to be taken for some of the more unusual language and dialects. ⁸⁸ The translation of recipes thereby raises unique problems with each editorial decision likely to have a drastic effect on the finished product.

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⁸⁵ Schwyzer, Literature, nationalism and memory, p.81
⁸⁶ William Salesbury, A briefe and a playne introduction, teachyn how to pronounce the letters of the British tong, (now co[m]menly called Walsh) wherby an English man shal not only w[ith] ease read the said tong rightly: but markyng ye some wel, it shal be a meane for him with one labour and diligence to attaine to the true and natural pronunciation of other expediente and most excellente langauges (London, 1550)
⁸⁷ ‘semper colere non cessarunt, qui & maiorum res gestas & recentiorum genealogias, atque Heroum laudes tum carmine tum prosa celebrarent, ac scriptis pariter & memoria conservarent’ John Price and others, Historiae Brytannicae defensio, Ioanne Priseo Equestris ordinis Brytanno authore. (London, 1573) pp. 9–10
⁸⁸ Hughes, The Forme of Cury, introduction.
Holtzman compares the use of memory to establish authentic testimony with its more objective but ‘‘older, frumpier sibling ‘history’” suggesting the latter may be preferred in academic circles with its reputation for empiricism. The subjective ways in which the past is remembered may result in debate about the limits of legitimacy of the historical testimony. In contrast it could be asserted that oral history offers a validation of memory considered more true and reliable than other records; the authority of the attestant lies in the sense that they must know what it was like ‘because they were there’. Welsh labour historians had a particular fondness for this testimony because the frequent involvement of the working classes complemented the trend for ‘history from below’. The narrative from those whose voices have not always been heard, can add balance to the educated hypothesis of historians or add detail to unwitting testimony, even the tone and intonation of an account may lend clarity to a textual version of an event. The end result is influenced by how the interviewer approaches the dialogue in terms of question and rapport, but this avenue of collaboration has made it possible to maintain a connection with an authentic past. There are obvious chronological and observational limits to the experiences of an individual but taken together a social or collective memory may emerge and be recorded, especially if sustained by social context.

The sensuality of food causes it to be a particularly intense and compelling medium for memory and can stimulate additional recollection of surroundings and associated emotion. This stimulus by context is, indeed, what Proust recalled when describing the embedded

90 Holtzman, Food and Memory, p.363
memories which assailed him whilst in bed eating a Madeleine dipped in tea. ‘Weary after a
dull day, with the prospect of a depressing morrow’ 94 this plump little cake transported him
into a delight that covered many pages with reminiscence of sunlit childhood memories. How
people remember hunger allows us to see how they had once lived and understood
themselves amongst the background of earlier deprivations or desires. There is also a
particular gendered theme which is central to some analyses of food and emphasises its
relationship to a specifically feminine form of memory in context to the historical period
examined. 95Thus, a wide body of literature emphasises memory structured through what is
construed as women’s special relationship to food, providing access to histories and
memories not found in other types of accounts. Bajic-Hajdukovic sees the passing down of
recipes from mother and daughter as a vital means of preserving their maternal identity; ‘in
our mother’s kitchens we don’t just combine eggs, milk and flour, we also hear tales and
participate in an oral ritual.’ 96 In keeping with this, the overwhelming majority of the
contributors to Minwel Tibbott’s oral history fieldwork were female.

Mati Thomas prefaces the collection of old Welsh recipes in her 1928 National
Eisteddfod of Wales entry with the declaration that ‘she would like to make a record of the
dishes from the latter part of the 18th century, whilst the people who could remember them
were still alive to recall them’ 97. She mentions that the foods that had been described to her
were simple, with plenty of variety through the seasons and cleanliness in the kitchen was of
prime importance; the brass and copper pans were polished to mirror perfection 98. The

94 Marcel Proust, ‘The Madeleine’ in The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink, ed by
95 Holtzman, Food and Memory, p.370
96 Linda Murray Berzok, Storied Dishes What Our Family Recipes Tell Us About Who We Are and Where We’ve
Been. (Praeger, 2010), p.19
Ivana Bajic-Hajdukovic, ‘Food, Family, and Memory: Belgrade Mothers and Their Migrant Children.’ Food &
97 Freeman, First Catch Your Peacock, p14
98 Freeman, First Catch Your Peacock, pp.25-26
infamous Welsh roasted cheese is amongst this collection of recipes, consisting of a piece of sheep or cow’s cheese, baked both sides in front of a fire and served on barley bread at least an inch thick.\textsuperscript{99} There are also many recipes for cawl in various forms, confirming its versatility. Whilst discussing beverages, Thomas mentions that tea was a special treat and shares an anecdote whereupon the lady of the house had ensured that her children and any workers were out of sight before indulging in a cup.\textsuperscript{100} Thomas provides a valuable historical testimony, but the work is frustratingly brief and lacks the detailed context of Minwel Tibbott’s project. Tibbott’s field work was undertaken whilst she was an Assistant Keeper in the Welsh Folk Museum’s Department of Oral Traditions and dialect, during the 1970s. Unlike Thomas, she benefited from the luxury of a tape recorder and modern transport.\textsuperscript{101}

When Minwel Tibbott began working for the Museum in 1969, the study of traditional foods in Wales was a new area of research and she realised that the written literature available was sparse. Travelling around all parts of Wales, she interviewed, recorded, and filmed the older generation, the majority of whom were women in their eighties, documenting memories from as far back as the end of the 1800s.\textsuperscript{102} Archivist Mienwen Ruddock-Jones at the National Museum Wales reveals that Tibbott’s interviewees were found in a number of ways.\textsuperscript{103} She explains that adverts were posted on village noticeboards, in post offices and on church community pages, and as knowledge of the project spread, people would write to the museum and Tibbott, or a colleague, would follow up on their letters. During her visits, the people interviewed would recommend that she visited someone else they knew in the village, and a trip to see one person could lead to

\textsuperscript{99} ‘Caws wedi ei bobi, caws llaeth defaid a gwartheg. Taffell o fara barlys modfedd o drwch o leiaf’ Thomas, \textit{Ryseitiau Coginiol. Sheet 7}.
\textsuperscript{100} Thomas, \textit{Ryseitiau Coginiol. Sheet 14}
\textsuperscript{101} Tibbott, \textit{Domestic Life in Wales, Foreword.}
\textsuperscript{102} Tibbott, \textit{Domestic Life in Wales, Foreword.}
\textsuperscript{103} Mienwen Ruddock-Jones, Archivist, National Museum Wales. Telephone conversation interview with Sally Linsell about the work of Minwel Tibbott and Anne Elizabeth Williams, 17 May 2022.
additional recordings. The interviews were carried out in the home and Ruddock tells of the charming testimony of background noises from the museum’s collection of tape-recorded interviews. She recounts an occasion when a man was being interviewed; there are the background sounds of his wife bustling around carrying out domestic tasks nearby, apparently to try and overhear the conversation- the sounds get closer and closer until finally she is unable to resist participating in the interview and ‘chips in’ to correct her husband’s version of events!

Although Tibbott did have a loose script to follow, the style of interview was informal and conversational, with the questions acting as a prompt, which then allowed the participant to shape the discourse. The exchange is familiar and comfortable; Lorna Rubbery is asked by Tibbott if she could remember some favourite meals she would have in the week-day when she was a child, and Rubbery replies ‘Well there was broth, cawl, erm, carrots, parsnips, everything in it, leeks, parsley, turnips, made out of very little meat probably’, and this leads into a story of how she used to visit a person in the village who had a ‘big garden’ and they’d give her ‘all sorts of things’ for the broth for three pence, such as carrots, parsnips, ‘everything but potato’. It is a compositionally different testimony to the more formal structure of a cookery book, or an academic summary of social history, and an invaluable addition. Even the emphasis and pitch of the voice changes the context, alongside a natural tendency to clarify and self-correct. Tibbott’s recordings remain in the archives at the museum of Wales, many of her recipes are to be found on St Fagan’s website and she

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104 Ruddock-Jones
105 Ruddock-Jones
106 Lorna Rubbery from Rhyd-y-car, Merthyr, Contents of Cawl, recorded by Minwel Tibbott. MP3 soundbite, provided for personal use, by Meinwen Ruddock-Jones. Available at National Museum Wales Archive, accessed 17 May 2022
published several books in which she transcribed this primary source evidence into collections of recipes and anecdotes regarding traditional Welsh food and domestic life.107

Whilst carrying out her research, Tibbott found that there was a distinct overlap between home-remedies and kitchen recipes, and the medicinal qualities of foods became a subject worthy of separate record. She transferred this endeavour to a fellow researcher, Anne Elizabeth Williams, who continued this work with similar methodology, although focussing on restorative remedies.108 There is not the remit within this dissertation to transcribe these illuminative findings, although they showcase an abundance of kitchen ingredients, but in testimony to the potential of memory scholarship, it is notable that some of the remedies remain virtually unchanged since the fourteenth-century. The hereditary physicians at Myddfai, Carmarthenshire, are described in folklore as descendants of a union between a lake fairy and a mortal and offered practical treatments for a variety of everyday conditions.109 These have been translated by Diana Luft from collections of medieval Welsh medical texts in manuscript 110 The physicians original remedy for ear problems required a bedtime dose of baked onion in the affected ear, and extraordinarily a version of this is recounted to Williams by Olive Evans of Rhos, six hundred years later under the guise of a home-remedy.111 Intriguingly twenty first-century studies have shown that the juice of Welsh onions specifically, has anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving properties, so perhaps more attention should be paid to medieval physicians and Welsh mams.112 Bobby Freeman drew

107 St Fagans National Museum of history. Welsh Fare
Diana Luft, Medieval Welsh Medical Texts, (Wales, 2020)
110 Luft, Medieval Welsh Medical Texts.
111 Luft, Medieval Welsh Medical Texts, p.242 Text also states further additions of boar’s urine, henbane, and eel fat may be advantageous.
widely from the work of Tibbott and Mati Thomas in order to establish authentic recipes, and praised the utility of their fieldwork. She also visited the elderly people of Wales to try and capture more detail for her studies and found that her passport to a productive conversation was a ‘bottle of proper buttermilk from a farm churning of butter’ which both ensured a welcome and opened up memories. 113

Using historical insight to establish an acceptable national cuisine, requires co-operation between social, political, and commercial interests. To sculpt the food to fit a specific policy may involve the adjustment or invention of ‘traditions’ that have no historical background, thus emerging as not completely authentic but undoubtedly useful. 114 Johnes observes that ‘romantics searched the past to find things they could use for their own purposes of sustaining Wales’115 during the late eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries. In a period of diffuse and mass societies, there is now a search for roots and a past in which people can call their own, secure from the turbulence of time and Said contends that the desire for connection with an image of the past is a ‘specially freighted late twentieth-century phenomenon that has arisen at a time of bewildering change’.116 Few activities involve so many senses as eating, and the foods of ‘home’ have a particular cultural saliency. This emotional connection is also used and misused by commercial interests; when food is described as heritage, it takes on even greater emotional weight, imparting value claims that transverse social structures and histories.117 This emotional association may create what Appadurai calls ‘armchair nostalgia’, a hunger for a past never personally experienced that

113 Freeman, First catch your peacock, p.14
116 Said, ‘Invention, Memory and Place’, pp.3-5
117 Ronda Brulotte and Michael Di Giovine Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage. (Ashgate, 2014.) p.2
appears once “the merchandiser supplies the lubricant of nostalgia” and the literature on food is filled with such longing.

Laverbread serves to exemplify a food that has been cast into multiple roles and currently occupies a position of hegemony in public representation of a traditional Welsh dish. Its Welsh historical pedigree is impeccable, and Robin Turner suggested that it is as ‘Welsh as our unspoilt rolling moorlands, mellifluous male voice choirs and long place names’. J. Mansel Thomas, described laver as the ‘Weed of Hiraeth’, hiraeth being described as an unattainable longing for a time or place, a bond with a homeland, or ‘a distinct feeling of missing something irretrievably lost’. Thomas surmised that ‘To many a South Walian, laverbread is what a Rhine wine is to a German, or a whiff of garlic to a Frenchman. Additionally, and less sentimentally, Welsh laver was partially responsible for the development of one of the most valuable aquaculture industries in the world. Dr Kathleen Mary Drew-Baker, a British scientist, solved the puzzle of the life cycle of Porphyra through studying laver from Wales in 1949, thereby laying the scientific foundation for rational and sustainable farming of Porphyra for nori production. In terms of terroir, history, and heritage, laverbread appears to have it all, along with a respectable reputation as a health food and links with ecological sustainability.

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120 Mansel Thomas, ‘The Weed of Hiraeth’, p.26
121 Lily Crossley-Baxter ‘The untranslatable word that connects Wales’ (15 Feb 2021)
124 Rhianna Rhees, Seaweed is sexy (Uppsala,2019)
Ann Garibaldi and Nancy Turner have identified what they call cultural keystone species, ‘plants and animals that are central to diet, identity, and ritual, to the extent that they become cultural icons’. Laver is one such icon, and Swansea, with its close proximity to the cockle beds of Burry Port, became the ‘laverbread mecca…and the food that fed the people as part of the industrial revolution’. However as the mining communities declined during the mid-twentieth-century, accompanied by the availability of convenience food, the demand for laverbread fell to the extent that the BBC Radio 4 Food and Farming program predicted it would become just another chapter in Welsh history. Despite its fame, laverbread was elusive and tourists may have concluded it existed only as a memory and nostalgia. When Jane Grigson visited Swansea market in the 1980s she was told that the laverbread she was purchasing came from Scottish laver, because local supplies were not always enough and could not be counted upon. Laverbread looked set to be disregarded, yet in the summer of 2007, Tesco supermarket considered removing laver from its South Wales branches, there was ‘an outraged howl of public protest that made the national UK news.’

The demise of laverbread was belayed when it captured the attention of a British government initiative to increase the status of British foods and increase the number of foods with Protected Designated Origin (PDO) status. Within this program, producers of ‘traditional’ food applied to receive a specialist European Union sponsored food label to designate their products as possessing certain unique characteristics. The PDO foods were

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127 Rhees, *Seaweed is sexy*, p.18
128 Rhees, *Seaweed is sexy*, p.18
129 Kaori O’Connor, *The Secret History of ’The Weed of Hiraeth’: Laverbread, Identity and Museums in Wales* *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 22 (December 2009), p.89
required to be exclusive in origin to a particular place, a local culinary tradition and upheld by an official institute.\textsuperscript{131} Currently ‘Welsh Leeks’ are also being considered as a Protected food name with Protected Geographical Indication, under a similar scheme.\textsuperscript{132} In 2017, after laverbread gained its PDO status, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths, extolled the reputation of Welsh cuisine, mentioning laverbread as an icon of Welsh food, bringing to mind its ‘historic origins on the beaches of West Wales’.\textsuperscript{133} The protection of the heritage of laverbread subsequently enhanced its marketability, in what Leitch calls a commodification of tradition, where the nostalgia becomes the commodity sold.\textsuperscript{134} Although a protected designation is useful for the purposes of marketing and identification, DeSoucy warns it can also be exclusionary, and inappropriately infer ownership.\textsuperscript{135} The supplier of Carmarthen Ham had applied for a PDO status in previous years, but joked that he had been beaten to it, claiming that "when the Romans conquered most of Wales, they settled in Carmarthen, pinched our recipe and took it back to Italy where they called it Parma ham".\textsuperscript{136} It is true that the movement of people and commodities have influenced the indigenous food culture. Italian ice-cream has been part of the Welsh food culture for over one hundred and thirty years, and Laudan claims that most traditional foods were invented within the last two hundred.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{131} Hurst, Much more than a name.
\textsuperscript{132} ‘Welsh Leeks’ Protected food name with Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs https://www.gov.uk/protected-food-drink-names/welsh-leeks
\textsuperscript{133}David Higgs, ‘This Welsh seaweed delicacy is now considered as prestigious as champagne’, Wales Online, 17 May 2017, Available at https://www.walesonline.co.uk/whats-on/food-drink-news/welsh-seaweed-delicacy-now-considered-13051222 Accessed 17 May 2022
In the late 1980s, the Slow Food movement emerged to demand a protection to local culinary traditions; this movement also relied heavily upon the inducement of nostalgia for marketing purposes. Lauden questions this militant nostalgia, calling the resistance to industrialised food ‘culinary Luddism’. In her opinion, the insistence traditional food should always be fresh and natural is an ‘article of faith’ rather than of scholarly enquiry. She observes that to make food safe and digestible, our forebears had to ‘beat it into submission’ and verifiably a number of traditional Welsh dishes go through significant procedures before becoming acceptably edible. Laverbread requires picking, washing, simmering, draining, seasoning, and frying- preferably with the addition of bacon fat - and oats are milled, crushed, sifted and soaked for days. Historically, extensive culinary preparation was not for the pleasure of labour, but out of necessity, especially before the arrival of electricity to domestic properties that revolutionised cooking and cold storage. Lauden also suggests that far from being the preferred option, local was the food of the poor who had been condemned to monotony, whereas the rich ‘bought, stole, wheedled, used and ran off with appealing plants and animals wherever they could find them’. This requires consideration, and those investing in nostalgia to elevate the status of traditional foods must remain ‘cognizant of their potential to promote a romanticized past that ignores the travails of peasants, farmers, and the poor’. Tradition is deeply associated with an idealisation of the past and shaped by language such as ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’, which suggest an unmoving

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138 DeSoucey, ‘Gastronationalism: Food Traditions and Authenticity Politics in the European Union’
139 Laudan, A Plea for Culinary Modernism, p.36.
140 Laudan, A Plea for Culinary Modernism, p.36.
141 Laudan, A Plea for Culinary Modernism, p.38.
142 Laudan, A Plea for Culinary Modernism, p.38.
past linked to antiquity. The problem of using these terms lies in their vague definition and powerful semantics evoking ‘sepia hued images’. In essence, traditional is nostalgic.

144 Di Fiore, Heritage and Food History, p.10.
Conclusion

‘Caws wedi’i Bobi – Welsh Rarebit

Cheese

A slice of bread

Toast a slice of bread. Bake a large slice of cheese and place on top of the toast.’ 146

Of all forms of material culture, food comes closest to a universal commonality; whilst attempting to avoid broad generalisations, the inevitable truth is that every person must eat if they are to stay alive. Food cultures are part of a narrative that will not stand still, traversing the public and private, and constantly being re-invented through new symbolic value. To establish what may be authentic, historical analysis is essential, and some inter-disciplinary form of dialogue would be welcomed, if for no reason but to interrupt versions of the past that bears little resemblance to the actuality. Historical testimony has been used as evidence that a recipe or a method of creation should be frozen in time, whereas in reality, a degree of modernisation was appreciated by our ancestors. The guidance behind food heritage labelling sources this rigidity, and through this may come an unintentional form of xenophobia, excluding difference, and claiming ownership of an ‘authentic’ national dish. This diminishes the long history of food cultures, with their connections and diversity.

If a national cuisine is to be defined purely by climate or geography, then it should be simple. Wales could lay claim to oats, for example, but then so could a great number of other

146 Tibbott, Welsh Fare, p. 22 (Banwy Uchaf, Montgomeryshire)
countries, so it would no longer be distinct. If a national dish must be unique, it may eventually be too remote from what is usually considered edible, resulting in form of neophobia and only provided for the novelty value. Part of the claim to a national cuisine comes from the preparation and subsequent transformation of the food, and this is a realisation of the hybrid entangled nature of all culinary identities. National cuisines are perhaps best understood as collections of dishes created to preserve the memory of a nation and introduce it to the outside world.

There is a clear link between food and memory, so these memories need to be good ones. No nation is going to want to present its national dish as a pauper’s plate; the image portrayed is of prime importance. National food discourse invariably recalls popular home-made food, and this is where the flair of the individual makes itself known - and why it is so difficult to pinpoint a recipe for a traditional dish. The study of oral history shows how the general ingredients may vary, but the emotions associated with a dish conjure up a common purpose and kinship. Even if the cook was particularly unskilled, the intimacy of a family recipe is often the food of home and referred to as comfort food. These comforting dishes tend to be easy to prepare, filling and familiar. Roasted cheese on toast, or cawl, would fit this description nicely. This is also where the inalienable nature of a national cuisine arises, it is the emotions that the food evokes, and the relationship to it, rather than the dish itself.

The discourse of nationalism is based on a mystification, reflecting not the social reality but what its nationals wish it to be. Images of Welsh mountain lamb, salty butter and home-pulled toffee may not suit those who wish to market a particular image of plant-based foods for example or promote health. On the other hand, these regional foods fit well with a notion of sustainability and support for the local economy -and they sound delicious. There may be ‘official’ foods of Wales which have, in part, been crafted to accommodate an authorised narrative of the Welsh identity, but there is also an ‘unofficial’ but inherent commonality to
foods which are associated with home; everywhere you go in Wales there are stories linked to food. Whilst Bobby Freeman was writing her seminal history of Welsh food, she was told by all manner of people that there was ‘no such thing as Welsh food’; of course there is, but just like Welsh history, it is fabled, contested, and reconstructed. To attempt to determine a definitive and ‘authentic Welsh cuisine’, means negotiating hiraeth; both terms exist, but each are singularly indefinable.

147 Freeman, First Catch Your Peacock, p.8
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