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## OBITUARY

### Laura Mason (1957-2021): An Appreciation



The food historian Laura Mason, who has died aged 63 from cancer, performed a great service to British food and food studies by researching and composing an inventory of the traditional foods of Britain (she masterminded England and Wales, while her colleague Catherine Brown investigated Scotland) on behalf of a hybrid committee called Euroterroirs, operating through, and financed by the European Union. The unlikely – and now some would even say suspicious – origin of this work does not detract from its value in highlighting the existence, the quality and the depth of British food culture at a time when, living in an era of plenty (for many if not for all), we were becoming increasingly preoccupied with matters of the table.

This preoccupation, occasionally obsession, has brought us more good restaurants, better supplies of raw materials and many, many recipe books. It has also stimulated greater awareness of food's significant role in every aspect of life, from society and the economy to the very health of the planet itself. One might think this a truism, but a vast academic infrastructure has appeared to instruct us that it is not. An early element of this scholarly reappraisal was an appreciation of food history, an interest driven in Britain by the circle around Alan Davidson, author of the *Oxford Companion to Food*, who was mentor to Laura Mason.

The book *Traditional Foods of Britain*, which appeared in 1999, was an inventory of some 400 foodstuffs that might be defined as long-standing (in commercial exploitation for more than three generations), regional (with definite links to a 'terroir', however that might be identified), and distinct. The research and composition had been undertaken by Laura subsequent to her appointment by the Euroterroirs committee in 1992 at the instigation of Alan Davidson and Henrietta Green. The broad intention of the committee was to list all such foods in the twelve nations then forming the Union with a view to extending the regime of Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). Laughably, this earnest endeavour was met with some derision in Britain itself. Laura talked of 'hostility, official and personal, to the very idea of the investigation.' When the moment came to publish its results, the official sponsors, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) and the marketing organisation Foods from Britain, washed their hands of it. In the end, I myself published it, a one-man enterprise in Devon. Larger publishers turned down Laura's

proposals for books based on her findings and it was not until 2007 that HarperCollins finally realised the subject was worth pursuing, reissuing the original as *The Taste of Britain*.

The intention of the Euroterroirs project had always been that the contributing member nations would take their findings and publish them in their home market. Many did just that, witness Cathal Cowan and Regina Sexton's survey of Irish foods and the more than a score of volumes relating to France, containing the encyclopaedic historical research of Philip and Mary Hyman, that was issued by Albin Michel over more than two decades. The British reaction was that no one would be interested and that there was no marketing value to be descried.

Laura was the youngest of three daughters of a dairy-farming couple on the moors above Ilkley in Yorkshire, Tom Mason and his wife Kate (née Harbutt). Her mother, a fine cook and household manager, had also studied agricultural botany at Leeds University and had some standing as a local historian. Laura attended Ilkley Grammar School then took a foundation course at the Bradford College of Art before moving to York to work with its Archaeological Trust. Her mother's instruction in the kitchen allowed her to combine this with a variety of jobs as cook or chef in and around the city, including several summers as cook on narrow boats cruising canals. After some years, she took herself off to Leeds Polytechnic to read for a degree in Home Economics, later improved by a further degree in Food Technology.

While fitted for a career in food processing of some sort, her real interests lay in the history of food and she fell in with the group behind the Leeds Symposium on Food History and Traditions, including the librarian C. Anne Wilson and the museum curator Peter Brears. This was an annual conference which drew together strands of research on specifically British foods. It met first in 1986 and gave her the impetus she needed to declare herself a freelance food historian. It was fortunate she met at Leeds Alan Davidson, the co-founder of the original Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery, who was himself in need of a research assistant for his large project the *Oxford Companion to Food*. Over the next few years she wrote or researched scores of articles for that volume. Interested readers can gauge the scale of her contribution by tallying the entries signed 'LM'. Under the letter 'M', they include Macaroons, Madeira Cake, Marble Cake, Marrons Glacés, Marzipan, Meat Extracts, Muffin and Mutton. Her particular responsibilities were confectionery, cakes, biscuits and baking ingredients, as well as meat and meat products. Her capacity for concentrated, goal-driven research was the quality that Davidson identified as a perfect fit for the task of describing Britain's traditional foods for Euroterroirs.

*Traditional Foods* also allowed her to travel through England and Wales in search of Bedfordshire clangers, Bath cheese or Goosnargh cake, meeting craftsmen and producers at every turn. These encounters were as profitable and enjoyable for her, as they were to her readers. Working for Euroterroirs had extended her range of expertise, but her principal area of enquiry had long been confectionery and sweet things. When

I came to publish her first book called *Sugar-Plums and Sherbet, the Prehistory of Sweets* (1998), it was much the richer for her enthusiastic jaunts all over Europe on the track of one speciality or another. She published a couple of other short books on this same subject, *Sweets and Sweet Shops* (Shire, 1999) and *Sweets and Candy: a Global History* (Reaktion, 2018). She also wrote several articles on the early nineteenth-century London confectioner William Jarrin. Later on, she was appointed an area editor for the *Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets* (2015) by the general editor Darra Goldstein.

Her travels also yielded an unmatched acquaintance with English country cooking which she explained and illustrated in a series of books for the National Trust. The most important of these was *Farmhouse Cookery* (2005), which was revised as *The National Trust Farmhouse Cookbook* (2009), but she followed it with individual titles on crumbles, roasts, pies and stews, and picnics. It was not for nothing that she hailed from a farming background and that her mother had taught her to make butter and cheese with milk from their own cows.

She never moved from Yorkshire and continued her close association with the Leeds Symposium, editing *Food and the Rites of Passage* in 2002, which contained the proceedings for the 1999 gathering, as well as contributing to and helping edit the volumes on the domestic dairy (2018) and moulded foods (which appeared after her death). She acted as chair of the organising committee after the retirement of Anne Wilson and was a constant presence at the annual meetings which have latterly been held in her home town of York (although retaining the name the Leeds Symposium).

It was interesting to track her attempts to interest publishers in her unmatched and untapped knowledge of British food after she had finished her research for Euroterroirs. She tried manfully to craft a narrative account of the current situation which read more appealingly than the somewhat dry gazetteer entries submitted to the committee in Brussels. To her frustration, none was interested: it simply did not occur to them that British food would be of interest to the wider public. Her knowledge, however, was harnessed by an American house in 2004 when Greenwood Press commissioned her to write the British volume of their series of national food studies (*Food Culture in Great Britain*, 2004), although the books were directed at academics and students rather than a general readership. She had to wait another couple of years before HarperCollins realised the potential of her work and issued a more accessible version of *Traditional Foods* which went on to sell many copies and was rejigged into regional volumes for a successor market.

Laura Mason never held an academic post. Indeed, she never, so far as I knew, had a job at all, but maintained herself as a freelance historian as she had wished to do from the outset. This did not mean a desk-bound life; she was in great demand as a speaker, giving lectures for organizations from the Ministry of Agriculture to York City Art Gallery and contributing to local and national radio programmes. Her expertise, too, was drawn upon in unexpected ways, not least in the creation of Honeyduke's sweetshop in the 2004 film *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, as taste-tester for

Nestlé-Rowntree, and as adviser on sourcing foods for the Conran Bluebird store in west London.

Laura's first husband, Ian Tomlin, died in 1982. She married secondly Derek Johnson in 2012; he survives her, as do her sisters Agnes and Ruth.

Laura Harbutt Mason, b. 7 August 1957, d. 2 February 2021.

*Tom Jaine*