

What Shall We Cook Tomorrow? Ireland on the Kitchen Front

Marzena Keating

ABSTRACT: In February 1941, the Cookery Editor of *Model Housekeeping* in the article published in *Irish Grocer* stressed: 'It is no longer with us womenfolk a question of what we shall have for breakfast, dinner or tea, but what can we get and what can we afford' (6). Although not directly involved in the Second World War, at the time known in Ireland as the Emergency (1939–1946), the Irish economy was strongly affected. As Ireland was dependent on outside suppliers for certain commodities, including fuel, machinery, fertilisers, 'the possibility of expending agricultural output was severely constrained' (Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, 1989, p.50). As a consequence, the availability of such consumer goods as bread, tea, butter, cooking and heating appliances declined, prices increased, the standard of living fell and the prevalence of diseases associated with poor nutrition increased (Kennedy, Giblin and McHugh, 1989, pp.49–52; Litton 2001, pp.115–17; Evans 2014, p.80). Finally, in 1942 the government was forced to implement the full rationing system, which was aimed to provide the equal distribution of scarce goods (Evans 2014, pp.44–68).

Both before and after the introduction of the rationing scheme, wartime called for both more and less official measures. The austere wartime circumstances elicited new ways of thinking about food, nutrition, and health. Information on all aspects of housekeeping and food preparation was in great demand at the time. In terms of providing access to nutritional knowledge and cooking skills, there was no shortage of cookbooks, culinary pamphlets, and cookery columns published during the emergency (*Flour Economy: Practical Recipes for Bread, Cakes, Etc. Based on Potatoes and Oatmeal* 1941; *The Homecraft Book* 1944; *All in the Cooking* 1946; *Family Cooking* 1946; *Kind Cooking* 1946, *Model Housekeeping* 1927–1966; *Woman's Life* 1936–1959; and *Woman's Mirror* 1932–1956). While some of the culinary texts and recipes published at that time made no direct reference to the problems of wartime cookery, most authors and editors did focus on the scarcity of certain products and the importance of proper nutrition. As household management

was traditionally regarded as a woman's domain, these texts attempted to teach and encourage housewives to acquire some necessary skills to be able to deal efficiently with shortages by making the most out of seasonal produce, minimising waste by using leftovers and finding alternative foodstuffs when they could not purchase certain ingredients.

This paper, based upon a qualitative content analysis of selected Irish cookbooks and women's magazines published in Ireland between 1939 and 1946, explores food representations and coping mechanisms suggested in the gathered material in relation to the shortages of many commodities and the rising prices of many products during the Emergency. Mitchell argues: 'Although cookbooks might not record events in the society as historical facts, nevertheless their contents are often a response to historical events' (2001, p.21). In line with Mitchell's findings, this research, based not only on the selected cookbooks but also women's magazines, aims to illustrate how culinary content registered the response to economic and socio-cultural factors. Furthermore, as the discourse reinforced the role of a housewife in taking responsibility for sustaining and nourishing family life under adverse circumstances, this paper also sheds light on the prescribed and perpetuated gender roles within the context of wartime cookery.

Reference List

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