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## Reimagining Irish Food Ways For The Twenty-First Century

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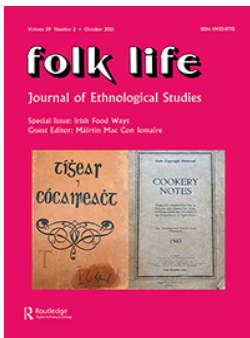
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# Folk Life

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## Reimagining Irish food ways for the twenty-first century

Food and drink are fundamental to life, and apart from costume, they are among the most noticeable markers of cultural otherness within intercultural encounters.<sup>1</sup> There is a current global interest in foods that are artisanal, local, traditional, seasonal and sustainable, and that tell a cultural story, as witnessed by the popularity of the Nordic Food Movement, or the 2021 Netflix series *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America*.<sup>2</sup> In 2019, the Royal Irish Academy published *A History of Ireland in 100 Words*, which had a special chapter on ‘Food and Feasting’ highlighting the importance of bread, milk, apples, and honey as iconic Irish foods, and including drinking horns, forks, cauldrons, and the champion’s portion ‘*curadhmhír*’ as other important cultural elements within Ireland’s history.<sup>3</sup> Food history has been gaining momentum globally for over half a century. In an Irish context, it has been sixty years since A.T. Lucas’s seminal paper ‘Irish food before the potato’ was published in this very journal.<sup>4</sup> Other individual researchers on Irish food history, traditions and customs included Kevin Danaher, Fergus Kelly, Louis Cullen, Brid Mahon, and more recently Finbar McCormick, Katherine Simms and Patricia Lysaght.

It has been forty years since Alan Davidson and Theodore Zeldin established the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery.<sup>5</sup> The symposium provided both a network and an audience for international ethnographers and food scholars such as Claudia Roden, Elisabeth Luard and Charles Perry to showcase their research, not to mention Irish symposiasts such as Myrtle Allen, Regina Sexton, Darina Allen, Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire (the present guest editor), Dorothy Cashman, Diarmuid Cawley, and Anke Klitzing, four of whom feature in this special thematic issue of *Folk Life* on Irish food ways. Inspired by the Oxford Symposium, the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium (DGS) was organized as a biennial event in 2012.<sup>6</sup> This initial meeting resulted in the publication of ‘*Tickling the Palate: Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture*’ in 2014, part of Peter Lang’s *Reimagining Ireland* series. This edited collection focused a food lens on Irish authors such as Maria Edgeworth, James Joyce, John McGahern, and Sebastian Barry, along with exploring food and drink consumption in various segments of Irish society from the elite households of eighteenth-century Ireland to the Dublin tenements of the 1950s, and on to the emergence of Ireland as a ‘foodie nation’ with the proliferation of Michelin starred restaurants and the widespread exportation of Irish pubs.<sup>7</sup> The DGS was a collaboration between culinary researchers at Dublin Institute of Technology, Cathal Brugha Street and key members of the Association of Franco-Irish Studies (AFIS) at the Institute of Technology Tallaght, at a time when the TU Dublin project was only aspirational.<sup>8</sup>

AFIS conferences soon began to organize gastronomy sessions, and further food-related chapters appeared in a number of other edited volumes within the *Reimagining Ireland* series (cf. volumes 55, 66, 68 and 93), and in volumes 9 and 14 of the *Studies in*

*Franco-Irish Relations* (SFIR) series, also published by Peter Lang.<sup>9</sup> A notable sign of food history's acceptance as a discipline in Ireland was the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Section C* special issue on food and drink in Ireland, published in 2015, edited by Elizabeth FitzPatrick and James Kelly, which covered an arc from the Mesolithic of Ireland to dysfunctional food consumption in twenty-first-century Irish society.<sup>10</sup> The special 'Food Issue' of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 2018 championed the importance of food in Irish scholarship, bringing it towards the mainstream.<sup>11</sup> This special thematic issue of *Folk Life*, furthers our collective insight into aspects of our shared culinary and food heritage. Christopher Kissane has observed 'we are long past the days when food was not given serious attention by historians. But that does not mean we have figured out how to approach such a vast subject'.<sup>12</sup>

A number of recent book chapters have traced the development of gastronomy, food studies and beverage studies in Ireland, making the case for food research as part of Irish literary, social and cultural studies.<sup>13</sup> The culture, traditions and history of Irish food have been explored in modules taken by undergraduates in the Dublin Institute of Technology since 1999. In 2007, the gastronomy module on the M.Sc. Culinary Innovation and Food Product Development brought the study of Irish food history and traditions to post-graduate level. Three of the contributors to this special issue completed the M.Sc. programme and explored Irish food-related subjects for their theses. 2009 witnessed the first PhD on Irish food history,<sup>14</sup> with a number of Irish food-related doctoral projects completed in the subsequent decade, both in Ireland and abroad.<sup>15</sup> In 2017, the MA Gastronomy and Food Studies in TU Dublin enrolled its first cohort of students who graduated in 2019. A core module on this post-graduate programme is the 'History of Irish Food: Applying the past', and a number of students have also pursued aspects of Irish food history or culture for their thesis topics, some of which also appear in this special issue. Short evening courses on Irish food history and traditions appeared in both UCC and NUIG over the years and culinary students in many of the Institutes of Technology around the island also studied aspects of the country's culinary past. An innovative post-graduate diploma in Irish food culture commenced in UCC in 2018.

This special themed issue has six original articles, all emanating from a cohort of researchers linked with TU Dublin. Dr Dorothy Cashman and John Farrelly's paper explores a biography of the quintessential national dish: Irish Stew. Anke Klitzing gives a gastrocritical reading of Seamus Heaney's poetry, using Elizabeth Rozin's 'structure of cuisine' framework. The online digitized Schools' Folklore Collection provided an accessible alternative primary source for two papers written during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the National Folklore Commission Archives in UCD were closed. Stephanie Byrne and Dr Kathleen Farrell's research investigated the food-related traditions associated with the Christmas period in rural Ireland, comparing the earlier popularity of tea, potatoes, goose, and whiskey in the late nineteenth-century and the emerging later preferences for plum pudding, turkey, fresh fruit and sweets in the 1930s. Caitríona Nic Philbín and Dr Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire explore the food traditions associated with Imbolg or St Brigid's Day (1<sup>st</sup> February), with comparisons to Christmas Eve, with a focus on potato and, for some, rice, dishes. Diarmaid Murphy explores the presence of traditional foods, some of them lost and forgotten, within 79 Irish cookbooks published between 1980 and 2015. He finds that while many Irish chefs praise their mothers for inspiring their cooking, few of them include family recipes in their publications. The final

paper by Diarmuid Cawley and Claire O'Mahony tracks the history and development of food criticism in Irish newspapers, asking how it reflected and helped shape a changing nation between 1988 and 2008. The transformation of Ireland into a 'foodie nation' is outlined from one shopper being sent to the pesticide section of a supermarket in search of pesto, to restaurant dining moving from a special occasion to a regular pastime.

In an article in this journal in 2018 Mac Con Iomaire points to feelings of inferiority regarding traditional Irish foodstuffs and food preparation.<sup>16</sup> Food in Ireland has been deeply influenced by its history as part of the British Empire, with its vast commercial trade network. Changes alluded to only briefly here, such as the growing preference for tea and white shop bread in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reveal Ireland's enmeshment as a primary consumer, the last link in supply chains of commodity production and promotion, that created new tastes, and markets to cater for them. Stuart Hall astutely notes such subtle interconnections enacted through food consumption. Referring to unseen but ever present colonial workers, whose toil produced such commodities, he points out: 'their labour power has long entered the economic blood stream of British society. It is in the sugar you stir; it is in the sinews of the famous British sweet tooth; it is in the tea leaves at the bottom of the next "British" cuppa.'<sup>17</sup> Substitute 'Irish' for 'British' and the same claim holds true. That such consumption came to be considered native and indigenous reveals the hegemonic power of the imperial system to effect change by influencing social mores and fashions. Irish stew provides another example of a dish surrounded by ambivalence and ambiguity. Likewise, tea, white, gluten-rich flour, sugar, dried fruits, etc., also represent symbols of social advancement eagerly sought after by Irish consumers. The ideological undercurrents of such trends inform all the papers in this volume. We hope that it will convince readers that food is a serious subject for study, leading to more research on its social and cultural significance.

## Notes

1. Joep Leerssen, 'From Whiskey to Famine: Food and Intercultural Encounters in Irish History,' in *Food, Drink and Identity in Europe*, ed. by Thomas Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 49.
2. S. Österlund-Pöttsch and H. P. Larsen, 'Islands in the Sun. Storytelling, Place & Terroir in Food Production on Nordic Islands', *Ethnologia Scandinavica*, 45 (2015), 29–52; 'High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America' (Netflix, 2021)
3. S. Arbuthnot, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and G. Toner, *A History of Ireland in 100 Words* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2019).
4. A. T. Lucas, 'Irish Food before the Potato,' *Gwerin: A Half Yearly Journal of Folk Life* 3:2 (1960), 8–43. <https://doi.org/10.1179/gwr.1960.009>; Lucas's findings were re-examined in 2013 in light of more recent research and found to be extremely robust, see L. Downey and I. Stuijts, 'Overview of historical Irish food products – A.T. Lucas (1960–2) revisited,' *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 22 (2013), 111–126 .
5. For further details and oral histories from key individuals, see: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/oxfor/>
6. For further details on DGS, see: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/dgs/2012/>
7. M. Mac Con Iomaire and E. Maher, eds., 'Tickling the Palate': *Gastronomy in Irish Literature and Culture* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014)
8. TU Dublin was formally established on 1 January 2019, the culmination of more than seven years of collaboration between the three partner Institutes – Institute of Technology

- Blanchardstown, Dublin Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Tallaght. <https://www.tudublin.ie/explore/about-the-university/history-and-heritage/>
9. F. Healy and B. Bastiat, eds., *Voyages between France and Ireland: Culture, Tourism and Sport* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017); E. Maher and E. O'Brien, eds., *Patrimoine/Cultural Heritage in France and Ireland* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019).
  10. E. FitzPatrick and J. Kelly, eds., *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Section C (Special Issue, Food and Drink in Ireland), 115, (2015). This special issue was later published as a book in 2016.
  11. R. Richman Kenneally and M. Mac Con Iomaire, eds., *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* (The Food Issue) 41 (2018).
  12. C. Kissane, *Food, Religion and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.9.
  13. B. Murphy, 'Drinking Spaces in Strange Places: New Directions in Irish Beverage Research,' in *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-first century*, ed. by E. Maher and E. O'Brien. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 91–110; M. Mac Con Iomaire, 'Applying a Food Studies Perspective to Irish Studies,' in *Reimagining Irish Studies for the Twenty-first century*, ed. by E. Maher and E. O'Brien. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 19–38; M. Mac Con Iomaire, 'From the Dark Margins to the Spotlight: The Evolution of Gastronomy and Food Studies in Ireland', in Catherine Maignant, Sylvain Tondour and Déborah Vandewoude, eds., *Margins and Marginalities in Ireland and France: A Socio-cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021), pp. 129–153.
  14. M. Mac Con Iomaire, *The Emergence, Development and Influence of French Haute Cuisine on Public Dining in Dublin Restaurants 1900–2000: an Oral History* (PhD thesis: DIT, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.21427/D79K7H>
  15. D. D'Auria, 'The Impact of Italian Foodways on Irish Food Habits in the Twentieth Century.' (PhD diss., UCD, 2012); B. Murphy, 'Changing Identities in a Homogenised World: The Role of 'Place and Story' in Modern Perceptions of French Wine Culture,' (PhD Thesis, QQI/Institute of Technology Tallaght, 2013); M. Deleuze, *La Dimension Identitaire des Pratiques, des Habitudes et des Symboliques Alimentaires de l'Irlande Contemporaine*. (PhD thesis, Université de Lille III, 2015); Dorothy Cashman, 'An Investigation of Irish Culinary History Through Manuscript Cookbooks, with Particular Reference to the Gentry of County Kilkenny (1714–1830),' (PhD Thesis, TU Dublin, 2016); Elaine Mahon, 'Irish Diplomatic Dining 1922–1963,' (PhD Thesis, TU Dublin, 2019); M. Keating, 'Bain Sult as do Bhéile: In Search of Irish Culinary Culture. The Meaning of Food and Foodways in Ireland in 1922–1973,' (PhD Thesis, SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Warsaw, 2019).
  16. M. Mac Con Iomaire, 'Recognizing Food as Part of Ireland's Intangible Cultural Heritage,' *Folk Life* 56(2), 93–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04308778.2018.1502402>
  17. S. Hall, 'Racism and Reaction (1978),' *Selected Political Writings*. S. Hall et al. New York, 2017, 145.

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