

Breakfast & Culture*

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1 Introduction

In everything we do, there are norms, expectations and cultural content. One way of thinking about the norms associated with the way we live is to look at the past. In this paper I will do this by looking at the daily activity of having breakfast in nineteenth century middle class England and rural Australia and contrast this with contemporary breakfast habits

2 Middle Class England

Mrs Isabella Beeton describes, in *The Book of Household Management* (1880), how to arrange a tablecloth in great detail. She asserts that ‘laying of the cloth is the most important item in household management; it exercises a certain *moral influence* upon the inmates of the house. . .’ (Beeton 1880, 427, emphasis added). The cloth is a symbol of morality and correct behaviour is likened to a perfectly laid cloth: without wrinkles and sparkling white. A cloth not correctly laid is for Mrs Beeton a symbol of uncontrolled behaviour.

Mrs Beeton makes a clear distinction between the people being served and the servants. She writes that a tablecloth should always be of good quality linen, except in the kitchen because: ‘servants ways and habits at table are not as *our ways*, and tablecloths will get cut and otherwise damaged’ (Beeton 1880, 427. Emphasis added). The book is clearly written for upper and middle class readers and Mrs Beeton emphasises the differences between the classes. The book also gives an insight in gender and family relations at the breakfast table: ‘The elder daughter,

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or next 'right hand' of the mistress, usually serves the coffee . . . whilst the mistress presides at the head' (Beeton 1880, 429). This quote uncovers a highly hierarchical and patriarchal family structure in Victorian family life, codified in the regimented breakfast ritual.

The food served during breakfast also indicates that this book is written for the upper middle class in mid-nineteenth century England. The people for whom this book is written drink tea, coffee or chocolate, combined with hot and cold milk and breakfast contains more than one course. The lifestyle of the people who enjoyed these scrumptious breakfasts must have been luxurious, with sufficient time to be able to enjoy a lavish breakfast.

The language Beeton uses is very absolute and normative. She uses words like 'must', 'should' and 'never' regularly throughout the text. The frequent use of these words reflects a very restrictive society, which is not surprising for Victorian England, as the word Victorian has become synonymous with strict moral standards.

3 Early Australia

Blainey (2003) offers a sharp contrast to the description by Mrs Beeton. Blainey describes life in Australia around the same time as Beeton wrote her book, but in a different social context. The book by Blainey is a social history of Australia and is mainly concerned with everyday life in Australia (Warburton 9 October 2003).

A book like Mrs Beeton's would be totally out of place in the Australia described by Blainey because the social context does not match the Australia described by Blainey. The people described by Blainey are 'hardworking farming families' who ate mainly bread and milk (Blainey 2003, 392), instead of the large variety of dishes served in the English breakfast described above.

The description by Blainey shows that distinctions between people were made according to the type of food people could afford, as food took up the largest portion of the family budget. Blainey distinguishes between the people who are able to eat at restaurants and at the 'other end of the ladder of pleasure' were the private kitchens (Blainey 2003, 392).

The differences between the breakfast described by Mrs Beeton and Geoffrey Blainey are a clear illustration of the lives of the different social classes that are the subject of their books. Lower class Australians had very monotonous diets. In poor households, bread provided most of the calories, and fatty dripping provided the

remainder (Blainey 2003, 392). The type of food also depended on local circumstances, as people with their own land were able to produce their own bacon, milk, butter and eggs. This is a sharp contrast with the Mrs Beeton story as her readers drink exotic beverages such as coffee, tea and chocolate. These drinks were some of the most expensive food in 1890 Australia and were only purchased when the family budget permitted (Blainey 2003, 396).

4 Contemporary Breakfast

In contemporary society, breakfast has become an individual affair and people are less inclined to make breakfast a ritual. For many, the television or radio is running in the background and family members have their breakfast at different times. Some people would claim that this shift in the breakfast ritual is a result of an increased individuality in our culture and we are no longer bound by strict rules, like Victorian England.

The food and drink we have, on the other hand, is much more like the middle class English breakfast than the lower class Australian breakfast. Tea, coffee and chocolate are common drinks and we have an enormous choice of food available for breakfast.

5 Conclusion

This brief analysis has shown that there is cultural content even in the way we have breakfast, which depends—among other things—on social class and our individual identities. Social class determines for example how much money and time we have available to spend on meals and our sense of family or individuality determines the way the breakfast table is organised.

References

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