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Hannah Maclurcan: colonial queen of cookery books

Abstract:

When Hannah Maclurcan wrote and published *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookbook* in 1893 she was running the up-market Queens Hotel in Townsville. The book largely provides instruction for reproducing the English style cookery typical of colonial Australia, but something else is bubbling up in this book: distinct local flavour. Instead of specifying indigenous British foods such as turbot and damsons she gives recipes for the preparation of Australian species of fish and seafood, and a range of – then – unusual fruit and vegetables that had been introduced and flourished in the tropical climate of North Queensland. There is also a hint of Asian flavour in some of the dishes and rumour suggested the Maclurcan took many of the recipes in the book from the Chinese cooks she employed in her hotel. This paper will explore Maclurcan as a culinary entrepreneur and the impact of locality on her cookery, and challenge the popularly accepted idea of the culinary 'ineptitude' of colonial Australia's Anglo-Celtic cooks and the mono-cultural cuisine they are purported to have served up.

Biographical note:

Charmaine O'Brien is a food writer, historian and culinary educator. She is the author of several books on Indian food history and culture, including the forthcoming *Penguin food guide to India*, a historical and cultural guide to India's diverse regional cuisine, and has written a culinary history of Melbourne. Her current research is focused on the food, cookery and eating habits of colonial Australians, which is the subject matter of a PHD in creative writing that she is undertaking with Central Queensland University.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Food writing – Cookbooks – Hannah Maclurcan – Colonial women entrepreneurs, Australia

On the 29th of September 1936, the headline of a short article in Brisbane's major daily newspaper announced: 'Author of famous cookery book dies' (Courier-Mail 13). The deceased writer it referred to was Hannah Maclurcan and the celebrated work *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook: a collection of practical recipes specially suitable for Australia*. This book was first published in 1898 in Townsville, where Maclurcan and her husband ran the Queen's Hotel. Three years later the Maclurcan's had moved south to Sydney where they took over the lease of a modest boarding house with the intention of transforming into a leading hostelry and by 1912 the grand Wentworth Hotel was occupying the site. The creation of this eminent establishment was almost Maclurcan's exclusive achievement as her husband died two years into the project (Maclurcan: 1949). She planned and managed the material re-development and expansion of the premises and culturally positioned it as the place for Sydney society and noteworthy visitors to dine, dance and slumber (Radi: 2007). Over the three decades that she helmed the Wentworth Maclurcan built a 'world-wide reputation as a hotelier' (Maclurcan 1949: 24) yet as the Courier's headline suggests it was her cookbook that she was most remembered for. Perhaps this was a parochial inclination on behalf of the Queensland paper as she had written the book, and acquired her culinary skills, in that erstwhile colony, while her celebrated role as chatelaine of the Wentworth had taken place in another state. *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook* had run to twenty editions though, with the last published in 1930, and it was said to be 'known everywhere' in Australia (The Catholic Press 1902: 22, Maclurcan 1949) and Maclurcan would have been more familiar to the wider populace as an author than an upmarket hotelier: *The Courier* also claimed that her cookbook had achieved international fame when Queen Victoria accepted a copy of an English edition of it – re-titled as *The 20th century cookery book: a thousand practical recipes for everyday use* – as a gift upon her jubilee².

Of the 100 or so cookbooks that had been written in Australia by 1898 women had penned the majority so Maclurcan's literary achievement was not unusual in that regard (Doyle 2010). Her success as a hotelier was also not entirely exceptional. Her father Jacob Phillips ran several first-class hotels in the Brisbane area and was considered a 'house hold word' in hotel keeping in Queensland (Morning Post Cairns 1898: 2), and Maclurcan had been apprenticed to learn the family business at a young age. As part of her training she learnt to cook in the kitchen of one of the family hotels (Maclurcan 1949). At a time when cooking in what Goody (1982) would term 'high' commercial establishments was exclusively a male domain, the fact of Maclurcan working to produce meals for customers in such a place was distinctive. Her direct kitchen duties ended she was seventeen and her father sent her to manage a hotel in Toowoomba. From here on Maclurcan's culinary responsibilities largely involved the superintendence of food related operations but her knowledge and experience of cookery ensured that her later independent enterprises were renowned for their cuisine, whether she was actually in the kitchen or not³. Three months prior to publication of *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook*, the Governor of Queensland, Lord Lamington, visited the Maclurcan operated Queen's Hotel and publicly praised the meals he had eaten there as 'exceptionally good' and 'above the average of Australian hotels' (The Capricornian 1898: 20). Praise from such a high personage would have served to confirm Hannah's reputation as an 'incomparable authority on cookery'

(TCP 1902: 22) and likely contributed to the rapid sell-out of the first edition, of 800 copies, of *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook*. A second edition – with a copy of a letter received from Lady Lamington and various ‘opinions of the press’ praising the book included – was expeditiously printed to meet the demand for it. A review of the first edition of the book in *The Capricornia* recommended that professional cooks ‘will do well to make themselves familiar with it’ (1898: 20), a suggestion undoubtedly made on the grounds that Maclurcan’s culinary repertoire had been learnt and proffered in commercial environments. By 1903 there were 26,000 copies of her book in print, a figure that suggests that people engaged in domestic cookery had also purchased it. Whether anyone ever actually cooked from it we do not know but the considerable number of copies produced, and the fact of many subsequent editions, provide support to the conjecture that Maclurcan’s book offers an insight into the food preferences and tastes of Australians in the late colonial and Federation period (Australian Women’s History Forum 2011).

Recent commentators have described *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookbook* as essentially a book of traditional British cookery – indeed the English edition of this book was largely the same as the Australian one which suggests it was considered perfectly acceptable to that market – but with more French influence than would be otherwise be expected in a typical tome on the subject (Bannerman 1996, Symons 2007).⁴ A quick browse through the book would confirm this global assessment. The bulk of the recipes are similar to those found in other colonial cookbooks, albeit that some are a little fancier, and these reflected the preference of the majority of colonial Australians for British style cookery. A closer inspection of the book though reveals a local flavor, distinctive of the tropical coastal region in which Maclurcan resided when her book was published, interwoven throughout it. The inclusion of recipes for local seafood and for then unusual tropical fruits and vegetables did not go unremarked by contemporary commentators and the literary suggestion of the glimmerings of a regional cuisine received an enthusiastic welcome. One of the newspaper reviews included in the second edition of the book trumpeted that ‘the work treats only how to cook Australian products, so there is no waste space in it’ (although this comment is not an accurate summation of the book’s content). Amongst what were considered the book’s distinctive Australian dishes (Wright 1983) were 75 recipes on the cookery of fish, oysters, crabs and prawns (Maclurcan 1898). This was a far more expansive treatment of the preparation and cooking of aquatic protein than that included in any prior colonial cookbook and it demonstrated Maclurcan’s expertise in seafood cookery.

Moreover, you must kill a crab before you put it into the boiling water; if you put it in alive, it will cast all its legs and claws, and the water gets into the body and spoils the flesh. To kill it you run a skewer down between the eyes (recipe no: 103⁵).

This lively evocation of an animated crab fighting to keep itself out of the pot and the unappetizing result of ending its life in hot water is one indicator that she had direct experience of dealing with crustaceans. Reading through the recipes in this section of the book provides further evidence of Maclurcan’s understanding of this particular culinary area. Experience would have also taught her that the fish hauled out of the waters around Brisbane – where she learnt her cookery skills – varied from those

caught in the warmer waters off Townsville and she largely refrains from specifying particular species of fish with the exception of barramundi, a species endemic to the waters of northern Australia. She must have had a notion that her potential audience would be interested in gaining an education in fish and seafood cookery relevant to what was actually available in Australia – rather than just faithfully reproducing English recipes that called for fish specific to that part of the globe – but not being too particular about types made the recipes relevant to people all around the country.⁶ Maclurcan's recipes for fish and seafood included several that reflected her own Jewish heritage – her father was a London born Jew – such as 'Stewed Fish (Jewish Recipe)' (no. 36) and Stewed Fish and Kleiz (no. 60), and her instructions for frying fish read: 'The Jewish people seldom use breadcrumbs [to fry fish], and always use the best olive oil' (no. 32). There are recipes for, and reference to, Jewish cookery throughout the book and it interesting to note that Maclurcan makes no attempt to imbue her book with the 'glamour of culinary ethnicity' (Appadurai 1988: 10) that a modern writer might seek to through the inclusion of such.

The prevailing view of the diet of colonial Australians is of meals made up almost exclusively of meat, bread and sweets with vegetables, barring a plate of overcooked cabbage, largely absent from the dining table (Bannerman 1996, Symons 2007, Santich 2006). This stereotype is lent weight by the absence of any extensive treatment of plant foods in most colonial cookbooks (which is not conclusive evidence that fruits and vegetables were not widely prepared and eaten by colonial Australians⁷). It is a little ironic then that the streak of regionalism in Maclurcan's book is expressed most strongly through fruit and vegetables. In the vegetable cookery section she gives recipes for tropical or warm climate varieties such as green bananas (plantains), pawpaw (prepared in savory style), choko and bringhall (eggplant). Maclurcan's selection of recipes for confection and condiments sticks to the standard English repertoire of puddings, sweet pies, custards, creams, ices, jellies and jams but includes versions of these prepared from tropical fruits such as grandilla (yellow skinned passionfruit), rosella (the 'fruit'/calyx of *Hibiscus sabdariffa*) prickly pear, pawpaw guava and mango that were absent from contemporary British cookery manuals (unless they treated of Anglo-Indian cookery).

Colonial Australians had experimented with eating indigenous plant foods in the earlier days of white settlement but on the whole they did not take to them (Santich 2011). By the mid nineteenth century every variety of fruit and vegetable eaten by the Anglo population had been introduced to the continent. It would be stating the obvious then to point out the fact of this in respect to the 'exotic' varieties included in Maclurcan's book: What is notable is that all of these fruit and vegetables originated in parts of the world where the climate was similar to that of North Queensland, and that at the time Maclurcan wrote her book these foods would have been 'new' to most Australians and not in common household use (and some would never be). Of eggplant Maclurcan wrote 'bringhall is one of the most delicious vegetables we have, but is seldom used; it makes a splendid breakfast dish sliced or grilled' (no.382) and on prickly pear: '[it] is a fruit seldom used here...it has the brightest colour of any of our native fruits [it was actually an introduced species]' (no.625). Maclurcan was an innovator who actively sought out, applied and promoted the new. Under her

stewardship the Queen's Hotel was one of the first places to install electric lighting and refrigeration technology (McGuire 1952). When she moved to Sydney she continued as an early adapter of the latest technologies and products into The Wentworth, and her own home, and regularly travelled to America to ensure that she was up-to-date with the latest trends in the hotel business and sophisticated modern living (as evidenced in the volumes of *The Wentworth magazine*, a publication she established). Her inclusion of recipes for less culturally familiar fruit and vegetables could be seen as a culinary expression of her innovative trait as well as one that reflected the region she was located in.

In the preface to the second edition of *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook* Maclurcan writes:

I would like to say, however, so as to clear up any doubt there might be on the subject, that the great majority of the recipes in this book are my own invention, a few were bought by me, and are, consequently, my own property, and a few have been given to me by friends (1898: preface).

Clearly 'doubt' had been expressed as to the sources of Maclurcan's recipes at the time of publication of the book, and more recent commentators have also expressed misgivings that the book was a completely original work (Bannerman 1996). Given this, a little speculative consideration as to the sources Maclurcan may have drawn upon for her regional recipes can be justifiably indulged in. It was common practice amongst cookery book writers of the period to 'borrow' recipes from preceding manuals⁸. Maclurcan's fellow Queenslander Mina Rawson's 1895 book *Antipodean cookery book and kitchen* included recipes for prickly pear jam and jelly and guava jam (Addison & McKay 1985) and Maclurcan's inclusion of recipes for the same items may have led to questions of whether she had copied these from her predecessor. There was a significant Chinese community established in Townsville by the late nineteenth century (North Queensland Herald 1896) and Maclurcan employed Chinese cooks at the Queen's Hotel and there was a suggestion that she got the recipes for her book from her oriental employees (McGuire 1952). Given the Englishness of the book, and Hannah's own culinary expertise, it is far-fetched to think she gathered all the material for her book from them but she may have drawn some influence from them. There is a recipe for beche-de-mer soup (no.15) in the book and the fleet that specialized in catching these 'sea-cucumbers' out of Townsville was operated by Chinese – who also caught the town's commercial fish supply (North Queensland Herald 1896). It is possible then that Maclurcan may have learnt the formula for the preparation of this soup from her Chinese cooks. It may also have been they who introduced Maclurcan to the use of vegetables such as plantain, eggplant and choko as these were in use in their native cuisine. Maclurcan also uses fresh ginger in a number of her savoury recipes perking up dishes such as kangaroo tail soup (no.27) and turnip stew (no.116) with it. Dried ginger was commonly used in cakes and puddings at the time but Maclurcan's use of it the fresh product suggests a more Asian flavor, and she may have been Australia's earliest exponent of east-meets-west cookery.

Creating *Mrs Maclurcan's cookbook* would have cost Maclurcan considerable effort regardless of from where she derived her recipes. The fact of it running to twenty

editions suggests that her efforts were well rewarded. She made alterations to each edition, including expanding the scope of the title to include New Zealand, and while the body of recipes remains largely constant there are two notable changes in the book. Over time most of the recipes using the regional fruits and vegetables discussed in this chapter disappear, while the advertising within it expands considerably with each new imprint. In the final edition (1930) each page has a line on the top of it promoting Heinz food products and another one running along the bottom promoting various other industrial food products. Maclurcan also began to specify more commercial food products in her recipes. Undoubtedly there was a monetary aspect to specifying food products by brand (Maclurcan's personal advertisement of products in *The Wentworth Magazine* show she was very astute when it came to product promotion) but the recommendation of new 'convenience' food products also fitted with her orientation to innovation as canned and processed foods were the byword in culinary fashion in the 1920s and 30s. Another innovation in later editions of the book was the inclusion of colour plate pictures of dishes such as Caneton au Mandarin, a la Wentworth, Jambon Lustre a la Gelee, a la Wentworth and Galantine de Poulet a l'Ecarlate a la Wentworth, perhaps it was to make room for instruction on how to create these elaborate concoctions that the earlier recipes for regional foods, a la Queensland, had been edged out. In 1949 the *Courier-Mail* tried to revive the use of tropical fruits by Queenslanders by running a competition asking readers to submit their recipes for these and calling up the ghost of Mrs Maclurcan as inspiration.

Endnotes

1. The English edition of Maclurcan's book was more specific in its recommendations of fish that were popular in that country.
2. There is no indication that this book was ever put to use in the monarch's kitchens.
3. It was not unknown for Maclurcan to get back into the kitchen if circumstances required it; she reportedly did all the cooking in the first two years of operating the Wentworth Hotel (Sydney Morning Herald 1936)
4. There was more French influence in their cookery than the average nineteenth century Englishman/woman cared to admit to, or they did not notice as it had been subsumed into their native cannon over time.
5. Page numbers are absent in Maclurcan's book. Recipes quoted in this work are referenced by number as per the format used in the 1898 edition.
6. The English edition of Maclurcan's book was more specific in its recommendations of fish that were popular in that country.
7. Eminent British food historian Ivan Day explained during a historic cookery course that I attended in 2010 that the absence of recipes for salads and vegetables from English cookery manuals was likely indicative of their acceptance as a standard part of a meal and that cookbook authors did not feel the need to write about such pedestrian items. Given the imitative nature of most colonial cookbooks it is possible that this was true also of these.
8. A practice that Eliza Acton famously complained of in the revised introduction to the second edition of her book *Private cookery for modern families* (1858).
9. I found a collection of press clippings of various articles from this publication on Chinese in Townsville pasted into a notebook referring to this in the Townsville library local history archive. These articles were dated but titles and page number were missing.

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