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More than just recipes: reading colonial life in the works of Wilhelmina Rawson

Abstract:

First published in 1878, *Mrs Lance Rawson's cookery book and household hints* was the first cookbook of its kind to provide recipes and household hints specifically tailored for life in colonial Australia. Over a long and prolific career, Wilhelmina Rawson instructed her readers on more than mere culinary matters, her works were also guides on what a colonial lifestyle should look like. Cookbooks are valuable cultural artefacts that mirror many aspects of the society that has produced them. They not only codify culinary and domestic practices but also codify wider cultural and social practices. Rawson's books, such as *The Antipodean cookery book* and *The Australian enquiry book*, provide fascinating insights into life at turn of the century Australia.

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The works of Wilhelmina Rawson not only provide a window into the nation's culinary history but also an insight into many aspects of society in late nineteenth century Australia. Cookbooks can be understood as social texts reflecting not just food practices but also aspects of the society that has produced them. Within the pages of Rawson's cookbooks many of the concerns experienced in colonial Australia can be observed including those of race, gender and class. Cookbooks were one of the most popular forms of advice literature in nineteenth century Australia. This form of prescriptive literature was not only 'a reflection of commonly shared knowledge' but also provided an ideal as to what a colonial lifestyle should resemble (Stoler 1995: 109). Rawson understood colonial housekeepers and the unique circumstances they encountered, including the isolation of bush living and the scant materials available for culinary practices, and adapted her recipes for these conditions. Her cookbooks, however, were more than just collections of recipes, they were instruction manuals for the many and varied aspects of conducting domestic life in Australia.

Wilhelmina (Mina) Cahill was born in Sydney in 1851 and came from a distinctly genteel and middle class background. She spent a significant portion of her childhood on her stepfather's sheep property near Tamworth; here she learnt the bush craft skills required to live in rural Australia, skills which she would later impart to her readers in her cookery and domestic advice books. In 1872 she married Lance Rawson, by whose name she would become well known as a cookbook author throughout colonial Queensland. After a five year stint on a cattle property west of Mackay Rawson, accompanied by her husband and three small children, moved to Kircubbin a sugar plantation fifteen kilometres outside of Maryborough. Her experiences as a housewife and housekeeper in remote areas of Queensland impelled her to write a book of recipes and household hints aimed at the 'young and inexperienced housewife living in the bush' (Rawson 1886: v). *Mrs Lance Rawson's cookery book and household hints*, which was first published by local Maryborough bookseller John Horsburgh in 1878, was the beginning of a long publishing career for Rawson. Hers was not only Queensland's first cookbook, but also the first Australian cookbook written by a woman. This book was followed, amongst others, by *The Australian enquiry book of household and general information* in 1894 and the *Antipodean cookery book and kitchen companion* in 1895, a book that remained in print into the last decade of the twentieth century. She also wrote on one of her favourite topics, the raising of poultry in Australian conditions, and published fairy stories in the *Wide Bay news*. As well, she contributed to the women's pages of *The Queenslander* and *The Courier mail* where she utilised her expertise to advise readers on all matters culinary. Her literary aspirations were recognised in 1890 when one of her short stories appeared in an edited collection called *Coo-ee tales of Australian life by Australian ladies* which also included a story by Rosa Campbell Praed. Rawson went on to briefly become the editor of the Labor leaning *People's newspaper* in Rockhampton. In the 1920s, Rawson would also have her memoirs serialised in one of Queensland's leading newspapers. While not quite becoming an Antipodean Mrs Beeton, Rawson's works became a feature on many Australian kitchen shelves, providing distinctly Australian recipes and household hints to a colonial society growing both in size and affluence.

In colonial Queensland, most homestead kitchen shelves contained at least one cookbook. It was common practice for young brides to be given a cookbook as a wedding gift. Most of these cookbooks would have been of British origin; booksellers' lists indicate that popular titles from the time were Eliza Acton's *Modern cookery*, Alexis Soyer's *Modern housewife* and the ubiquitous *Book of household management* by Isabella Beeton (Santich 2006: 42). *The Queenslander* newspaper queried the usefulness of many of these British cookbooks, branding them useless for those who lived 'beyond the reach of shop accommodation' and claiming these books only suggested the 'bare imagination of a feast' (Anon. 1878: 170). Some of these cookbooks were English with a colonial character, the second edition of Mrs Beeton's book published in 1869, for example, contained a chapter dedicated to Australian Cookery. Others, such as Edward Abbot's *The English and Australian cookery book: cookery for the many, as well as for the upper ten thousand*, published in 1864 and considered the first Australian cookbook, included English recipes suited for Australian conditions as well as recipes for kangaroo and other local fauna. In the introduction to the second edition of her *Cookery book*, Rawson was conscious of her readership and explicitly stated that the book was written 'entirely for the Colonies' (Rawson 1886: viii). She cited her long and varied experiences in the many different climates of the colonies as the source of her expertise (Rawson 1886: vii). Advertisements placed in *The Sydney morning herald* for *Mrs Lance Rawson's cookery book* highlighted the practical nature of her work and noted the fact that the recipes contained in the book were 'adapted especially for the Australian colonies' (Anon. 1879: 11). Reviews of some of Rawson's later works continued to note the Australian character of her cookbooks and the fact that they thoroughly met the practical requirements of Australian homes.

The nature and form of the advice contained within Rawson's books reflected the overwhelmingly gendered nature of domestic work across Australia. Within the domestic realm cooking was a gendered practice and considered almost exclusively 'women's work'. For women, this private domestic sphere also implied monotonous and repetitive labour, the preparation of food, the upkeep and maintenance of the home and the care of the family's everyday needs. Rawson, like many authors of her time, addressed a specifically female audience in the introductions to her cookbooks. She used specific terms such as housewife and matron to refer to her readers. A reviewer of Rawson's first book recognised the audience for her cookbook by claiming that the work was intended more for the young housewife at the homestead than for the shepherd or miner in his hut'. In her 1895 *Antipodean cookery book* Rawson clearly noted the importance of domestic skills for women informing young girls who might possess her book that:

only by feeding him well will you succeed in gaining your husband's respect and keeping his affection. The husband is a creature of appetite, believe me, and not to be approached upon any important matter, such as a new bonnet or a silk dress, on an empty stomach (Rawson 1992: 5).

Rawson was very aware of the educational purpose her cookbooks served in the

kitchens of Australian homes. Together with many of her contemporaries, Rawson saw the acquisition of proper domestic skills as an intrinsic aspect of a woman's role within the home. She explicitly stated that her books were aimed at the inexperienced housewife and gave not only recipes, but also household hints which she considered 'useful to those beginning housekeeping' (Rawson 1886: v). Rawson despairingly noted that it was 'the exception, rather than the rule, to find a young lady who can really cook and serve a dinner that is eatable, let alone enjoyable' (Rawson 1992: 49). She continued to provide advice to women in the pages of the *Queenslander*, where she edited an advice column under the pseudonym 'A mother'. Rawson used a form of authorial voice that allowed her to mirror and reproduce the manner through which cooking knowledge had traditionally been handed down, from mother to daughter, and which had begun to disappear with a colonial mobility that often separated families across vast distances.

Despite her scepticism about many young women's cooking skills Rawson recognised that many did have expertise and abilities in this department. She was certain 'every housewife knows something worth telling for the benefit of others' and encouraged them to share this knowledge. She herself belonged to a small society that exchanged cooking hints and recipes by mail. As she wrote in her 1894 *Australian enquiry book of household and general information*: 'Anyone who discovered or invented a new dish or cake at once made it known to the others; and in this way each was benefited by the cleverness of the whole number' (Rawson 1894: 14).

For those living in remote areas of rural Queensland, there were many difficulties inherent in housekeeping, including the hard physical work involved in day to day domestic practices. However, much of the quotidian drudgery in Rawson's house was undertaken by servants. The role of the mistress in many colonial households was one that has been labelled one of participatory responsibility (Pike Bauer 2007: 100). This role involved the purchasing of the necessary ingredients, monitoring the preparation and serving of the daily meals and the supervision and delegation of other household tasks. This situation led to complex class hierarchies within the Rawson household, including a marked distinction existing between mistress and servant and which prompted her to devote an entire section of her first book to dealing with servants. Rawson claimed that, to successfully deal with servants, the mistress 'should know exactly how the work should be done' (Rawson 1886: 1). She was keenly aware of the inherent differences in the relationship between herself and servants and distinguished servants as a class (which she highlighted in italics) separate from her own (Rawson 1886: 1). While Rawson somewhat contemptuously referred to servants as a 'plague' she also freely admitted that they 'all cannot be bad' and placed a portion of the blame for spoilt and unfit servants on a 'bad mistress' (Rawson 1886: 1). The class anxieties that existed in nineteenth century Australia demanded that the young housewife dutifully perform her position as mistress of the house. Rawson advocated that the young housewife use a firm, strong hand in dealing with her servants lest 'she become second instead of first in command' (Rawson 1886: 1). In Rawson's case this extended as far as forcing her Melanesian house servants to cut their hair against their will (Rawson 1926: 7). Whilst living in rural Queensland

allowed Rawson to employ servants from a pool of inexpensive Melanesian and indigenous labour this would not always be the case. The growing scarcity of servants by the last decade of the nineteenth century led Rawson to focus less on the role of domestic servants within the home. The nature of her advice changed and became directed at ‘those young ladies of a family who do the cooking and have the ordering of the meals themselves’ (Rawson 1894: 9).

Rawson’s early works also dealt with the complex issues of race relations. On the surface her relationships with the local Aboriginal peoples and her Melanesian servants reflected the racial hierarchies present in colonial Queensland in the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, her relationship with Aboriginals was also complex and nuanced. In describing the Aboriginals living near her property she uses many of the racist epithets common in colonial Queensland. Nevertheless, Rawson demonstrated a profound understanding of the dispossession of Aboriginal land occurring in Queensland and wrote sympathetically of the ‘lessons white men should learn from the blacks before the work of extermination, which is so rapidly going on, as swept all the blacks who possess this wonderful bush lore off the face of the earth’ (Rawson 1886: 35). Despite these initially sympathetic attitudes towards Aboriginals her views on race hardened in later life. In her serialised memoirs, written forty years after the publication of her first cookbook, she bluntly professed that she had no ‘love or even liking for the blacks’ and that in fact she ‘hated them all’ (Rawson 1920b: 5).

Women like Rawson often employed Melanesian indentured labour as domestic servants in rural Queensland. While her relationships with her ‘Kanaka’ servants mirrored prevalent class and race anxieties she also spoke of them fondly and appeared to have gained a sincere respect for them during her time in the Maryborough region. In her memoirs Rawson reminisced about her ‘Kanaka’ servant Dinah who was working for her at the time she was writing her first cookbook. She remembered her as a loyal servant and a good friend but added the caveat that she ‘had some very funny ways, which one could hardly reconcile with civilised life’ (Rawson 1920a: 5). The innate racial characteristics which were ascribed by social scientists in the nineteenth century to those with dark skin served to rationalise the servile position of Melanesians in Queensland society (Evans, Saunders & Cronin 1988: 180). Her predilection for Melanesian labour also reflected a racial hierarchy that placed Melanesians above Aboriginals. Rawson would continue to advocate for the employment of Melanesian labour for the rest of her life, arguing that the abolition of ‘Kanaka’ labour would lead to the ‘enslaving of the wives and children of every man who has a small holding’ (Rawson 1901: 2).

In many ways, Rawson performed her role as a colonialist with some relish. Her desire was to tame what she deemed to be a ‘savage’ land through the cultivation of European crops and to alter the landscape surrounding her into her own personal vision of civilisation. She also attempted to bring the colonial idea of ‘civilisation’ to its inhabitants and judged them by European standards. Yet, at the same time, she also adapted to the local environment and made full use of all the bounty at her disposal. These contradictions point to the insecure boundaries of the colonial enterprise.

Despite Rawson's concerns with servants, Aboriginals and the role of women in the home, her cookbooks were primarily concerned with providing her readers with recipes. Like many other British colonial cookbooks of the era the substantial majority of her recipes were of Anglo-Celtic origin. As Adele Wessell has noted, food consumed in colonial spaces also served as a 'device to reaffirm cultural and historical bonds and to sustain a shared sense of British identity' (2004: 811). Her culinary repertoire also embraced the flavours of Empire and included Anglo-Indian dishes like Mulligatawny Soup and the inevitable recipes for curry, including curried crayfish and herring. Rawson even suggested that curried witchetty grubs would make a great delicacy (Rawson 1992: 54). Her aspirations were also global. She provided recipes for smoked German sausages, probably gathered from the German community that had settled in the Maryborough area, and for home-made pasta. One of her books even featured a rather dubious recipe for 'A Chinese Dish' whose only Chinese characteristic appears to have been that it was served with rice.

One of the most distinguishing factors of Rawson's cookbooks was her willingness to use a wide range of native wildlife for culinary purposes. Whilst many Australian cookbooks of the era provided some recipes for kangaroo, wallaby and bush turkey, Rawson's culinary adventurism extended beyond this limited repertoire. The *Queenslander* newspaper praised Rawson's use of Australian wildlife, claiming it would aid in reversing the 'unreasoning aversion' with which many colonists held its consumption (Anon. 1878: 170). She described how local Aboriginals prepared iguano (sic) and, while somewhat dismissive of the culinary merits of goanna grilled over an open fire she proclaimed that the tail 'makes an excellent curry' (Rawson 1886: 33). In her *Australian enquiry book* Rawson gave a recipe for stewed Ibis, a bird she herself admitted had a 'very objectionable odour' and one that was not usually seen on the tables of Australian homes (Rawson 1894: 41). Rawson also lauded the merits of roasted carpet snake, cobbera worms and large grasshoppers. Flying foxes also found their way into Rawson's kitchen, to prepare these she relied on advice given to her by her favourite Melanesian house servant Dinah. While not featuring in any of her cookbooks Rawson reminisced of curing the belly of the dugong to transform into ersatz bacon. Australian colonists had a tenuous and ambivalent relationship with the consumption of native wildlife. These tensions, in many ways, reflected the relationships that many colonists had with both the Australian landscape and its indigenous inhabitants. Rawson, however, demonstrated no such qualms and believed these ingredients not only served as an alternative to the monotonous diet of salt beef endured by many in the bush but also provided the bush housekeeper with a 'sumptuous repast not far from her kitchen' (Rawson 1886: v).

Rawson was also keen to use the local flora for culinary purposes, writing favourably of native yams, wild mushrooms that tasted just like asparagus and of the young shoots of the wild rough leaved fig, all which had been pointed out to her by local Aboriginal women. Recipes for a native sour thistle salad and nettle beer were also included in her first cookbook. She took great pride in her ability to preserve native fruits such as Lilly Pilly and some which she claimed were unknown to anyone else (Rawson 1894: 78). Rawson urged her readers to experiment and try everything

claiming that ‘the almighty has placed it there for the benefit and sustenance of man’ (Rawson 1992: 55). She also understood the knowledge that many Aboriginals had of the environment around them and of the abundant sources of food available in the bush and informed her readers that ‘whatever the blacks eat the whites may safely try’ (Rawson 1992: 54).

Through the recipes and advice she provided in her cookbooks Wilhelmina Rawson attempted to educate and inform her readers on the best manner in which to carry out domestic duties in colonial Australia. In doing so, she reveals many aspects of Australian colonial life that stretch beyond the boundaries of the home kitchen. Her relationships with her servants, local Aboriginals and with her readership encapsulate many of the tensions and concerns that existed in Australian society at the time. The culinary experimentation that is evident in her cookbooks demonstrates an embryonic and distinctive Australian culinary character which in turn reflects a distinctive and unique colonial identity. The works of Wilhelmina Rawson are a wonderful example of the value that old cookbooks have as a rich historical source not only to discover the way we ate but also the way we lived.

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