

## Australian War Memorial

Alison Wishart

### Reading between the recipes of *Our cookery book*

#### Abstract:

*Our cookery book* is both a culinary and historical source. The ingredients chosen for the recipes provide an insight into food economy and wastage, diet and nutrition, and food preferences in Australia in the early twentieth century. Its popularity – it was re-printed at least 24 times from 1916 to the 1950s – attests to its uptake by at least two generations of women. In the preamble, the author discusses the five components of food ‘necessary to build up the body’. This is the first time that components of nutrition such as protein, fats and carbohydrates are discussed in a cookbook. In the introduction the author, Miss Flora Pell, also draws links between nutrition and nation building. She writes about the important role of women as cooks in building up a nation of strong, fit and healthy citizens who will go on to contribute to community life and national prosperity. *Our cookery book* is a fine example of domestic feminism, iced with patriotism, which was first published during the First World War. It is much more than a collection of recipes.

#### Biographical note:

Alison Wishart has worked as a curator and/or collection manager since 2003 at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville and the State Library of Queensland (Brisbane) before moving to Canberra in 2008 to work at the National Museum of Australia and now the Australian War Memorial. She has a BA (Hons) from the University of Queensland and a Masters in Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage from Deakin University. Alison has curated exhibitions on topics as diverse as Johnny Warren’s football career, the removal of Indigenous children from their families in Queensland and long distance love. She is currently dealing with the complexities of managing a photographic archive at the Australian War Memorial that contains both physical and digital items, sometimes with multiple versions of the one image. Alison is currently researching the psychological, social and physical impacts of food at the front during the First World War.

#### Keywords:

Food writing – Cookbooks – Nutrition – Nationalism – Domestic science – Feminism

Some cookbooks can be used as history books as well as recipe books. Flora Pell's *Our cookery book* is one such book. First published in 1916, and reprinted over 24 times into the 1950s, its sheer popularity and endurance make it an important object of study. It was also one of the first Australian cookbooks to discuss nutrition. During the 40 years it was in print, some of the recipes changed names and some of the ingredients changed due to societal pressures, which adds to its historical significance. From 1916 to 1928, *Our cookery book* was used as a textbook in Victorian schools. It was part of the shift away from girls learning domestic skills at home, to learning them in the formal education system. In her introduction, Flora Pell talks about the importance of cooking and nutrition for building up a nation of strong men and women who can serve the community and the country. Pell is responding to the changing roles of women and advocating for the importance of women as cooks who provide wholesome, economical meals that nourish future citizens. Finally, Pell's *A sunshine cookery book* is a marketing exercise and a clarion call to Australians to support the agricultural work of returned soldiers, whilst boosting their vitamin C and fibre, by eating more dried fruits.



Fig. 1 Miss Flora Pell, from Edward Sweetman et al. 1922 *History of State education in Victoria*, 260

### ***Our cookery book's popularity***

*Our cookery book* has been the book that at least two generations of Victorian women turned to for cooking advice. In response to a small article in *The Age* Epicure section in March 2011, some 25 Victorians contacted me with their memories of it. Here are some of their comments:

- 'My mother Lynette Parker adores Flora Pell's cook book which she treasures and refers to many times, over and over again.'

- Alicenne Stevens says: ‘my mother and her sisters swore by her book and I still have my mother’s battered copy. Mum used to say she liked her because the instructions were so clear, almost basic – Mum used to joke they were: Walk into kitchen, Approach stove etc.’
- Lorna Roberts, Nelva Roberts and Valerie O’Byrne’s mothers used the book at school and said: ‘Flora Pell was our bible’.
- Alison Taylor writes: ‘My mother always quoted Flora Pell as an authority – the recipe book was used over and over until the pages were badly discoloured and the book fell apart’.
- Barb Doherty, Carol Booth and Margaret Ley received copies of *Our cookery book* as wedding presents, well after the last publication date in the 1950s. Coral Ware was given a copy when she married in 1967.

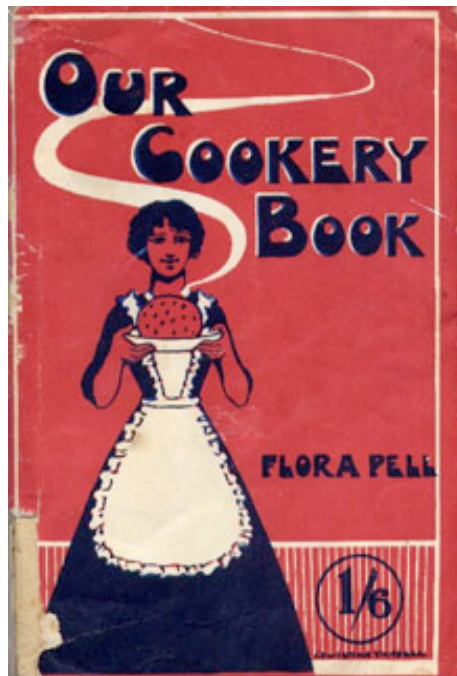


Fig. 2. The cover of the 8th edition of *Our cookery book*, published about 1924. Cover illustration attributed to Christian Waller (née Yandell). Melbourne: Specialty Press

### Nutrition and *Our cookery book*

Flora Pell understood the importance of a balanced diet. In the introduction to *Our cookery book*, she identified the five components ‘necessary to build up the body’ and maintain it in a ‘vigorous condition’: ‘1. Body-builders (protein); 2. Heat-producers (fats); 3. Energy-producers (carbohydrates); 4. Water; 5. Mineral salts’ (Pell 1950: 5). Today nutritionists would add fibre and vitamins to this list, but these were not ‘discovered’ until the late 1940s. Pell does discuss ‘the vitamins’ and identifies those foods containing vitamins A (‘green vegetables, milk, fish oils and “nut” butters’), B (‘germ, outer coats of cereals, pulse plants, yeast and eggs’) and C (‘green vegetables and fresh fruits’) (Pell 1950: 9).

Nutritionist Michelle Minehan, from the University of Canberra, has analysed Pell's discussion on nutrition and compared it to what we know today. Pell's recommendations for daily intake (for a man of moderate work) are within the current dietary guidelines.

|              | % energy from nutrient | % energy from nutrient |
|--------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|              | Flora Pell             | *NHMRC AMDR            |
| protein      | 20                     | 15–25                  |
| fat          | 20                     | 20–35                  |
| carbohydrate | 60                     | 45–65                  |

\*NHMRC (National Health and Medical Research Council) AMDR (Acceptable Macronutrient Distribution Range) is the range of macronutrient intakes on a % energy basis considered to reduce chronic disease risk while still ensuring adequate micronutrient status.

Tab. 1. Comparison of Pell's quantitative recommendations for protein, fat and carbohydrate as percentage of total energy intake with current standards

Writing in 1916, Flora Pell was one of the first cooks to advocate that Australians would be healthier if they consumed red meat only once a day, instead of two or three times as was common. She was even more convinced of this after a study trip to the USA in 1923 where she declared that Australians would benefit from adopting some American dietary habits such as a 'dainty' breakfast of 'grapefruit or oranges and freshly made rolls and coffee' and salad with almost every meal (*Argus*, 17 November 1923: 21). Knowing that it takes time to change eating patterns, she informed readers about the different cuts of meat for pork, beef, chicken and lamb, and provided recipes for using every part of the animal – tongue, liver, head, neck, knuckles, tail. Today it is hard to find a recipe book which contains recipes for the cheaper cuts of meat – with the exception of osso bucco and lamb shanks. Pell also identified alternative sources of protein such as split peas, eggs, nuts, oatmeal, cheese, sago, barley and milk and advocated a varied diet (Pell 1950: 7). *Our cookery book* tells us about the central place of meat in the Australian diet, that cooks learnt ways to prepare a variety of different cuts (see Fig. 3), and that Pell was a pioneer in providing recipes for dishes high in protein that did not use meat (Pell 1950: 95–9).

Today we have a wide range of low fat food products, but when Pell was writing in 1916, fats were harder to obtain and much more expensive. *Our cookery book* tells us of an era when mothers were urged to ensure that children had enough fat in their diet – 'they must not be stinted of them' – rather than too much (Pell 1950: 7). Most of Pell's recipes use saturated fats such as dripping, suet and butter which are less healthy than fats derived from plants such as olive oil and avocado. Perhaps this explains why Pell's suggested daily intake of fats is at the lower end of the current recommended range (see Tab. 1).

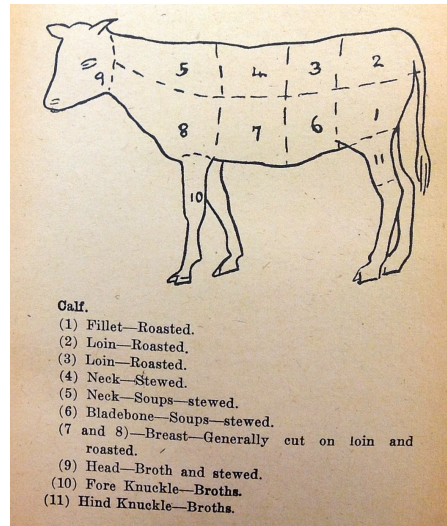


Fig 3. Pell's instructions for identifying the different cuts of veal and how to cook them.  
*Our cookery book*, 22<sup>nd</sup> edition, 8

A close reading of Pell's discussion of 'Facts about food' implies that many Australians suffered from under-nutrition. The diet of Australian soldiers fighting at the front, whilst limited, was representative of the main food groups of most working class Australians. Soldiers survived on tins of bully beef (corned beef), bread, black tea and jam. Comfort parcels sent from home consisted of cake and Anzac biscuits. Green vegetables were not eaten in great quantities or as regularly as meat and cakes (Laurence & Tiddy 1989: 10). Flora Pell sought to educate her readers about the importance of different nutrients, where to find them in food and how to get the balance right.

Pell provided her readers with information about how to maintain a good diet and 'economy in the provision of food' and 'utilising left-overs'. This implies that feeding a family healthy food was an expensive operation in 1916, as it can be today. Readers learnt how to cook tough cuts of meat, save animal fats and use them as substitutes for butter, and use celery tops, stale bread, sour milk, bacon rind and leftover vegetables in cooking (Pell 1950: 10). Modern Australians could learn much from Pell's strategies to economise and minimise food wastage.

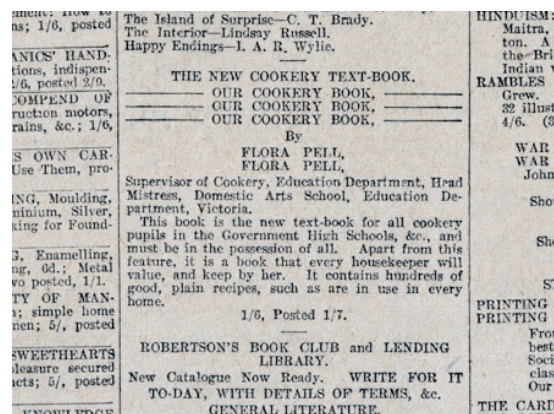


Fig 4. Advertisement that appeared in the *Argus*, 8 July 1916: 6. National Library of Australia



### ***Our cookery book, domestic arts colleges and the education of girls***

Pell wrote and found a publisher for *Our cookery book* because she saw the need for a text book for the girls who were coming to the new domestic arts colleges (Fig. 4). The Victorian Education Department established two domestic arts colleges in 1915 in the working class suburbs of Fitzroy and Collingwood – they invested the considerable sum of £1960 to remodel a building for the Collingwood School (Fig. 5).<sup>1</sup> The colleges were in response to public pressure for more domestic training for girls, who were increasingly choosing jobs outside the home as dressmakers, milliners, school teachers or nurses (*Argus* 2 August 1916: 12-13). Although these opportunities were limited, they still challenged the long-established and traditional idea that a woman's place was in the home.



Fig 5. Collingwood Domestic Arts College. Pell taught cookery at this school and was headmistress from 1915 to 1924. Young, John 2007 *The School on the Flat: Collingwood College 1882-2007*, Melbourne: Collingwood College, 33

Domestic arts colleges were specialised high schools just for girls. Girls aged 12 to 14 years spent half the week learning cookery, laundry work, needlework, millinery, dressmaking, personal and domestic hygiene and practical household management. For the other half of the week, they received instruction in academic subjects such as English, arithmetic and science (PROV VPRS 10274/PO/2 File 1175). *Our cookery book* was used as a text book by students from 1916-1928. The Education Department demanded that students and teachers stop using it after it had a bitter fight with its author, which led to Flora Pell's premature retirement in 1929.<sup>2</sup>

Pell was passionate about her job. She firmly believed that a girl's education was incomplete until she was trained in the principles of 'true household economy', cookery and nutrition. These three things are covered in detail in *Our cookery book* and Pell's two other cookbooks.<sup>3</sup> For Pell, girls were 'the guardians of the future'. She believed there was a link between training girls to be wise mothers who cared for the physical, mental and moral health of their children while running efficient and effective households, and the prevention of juvenile crime (*Argus* 4 June

1924: 6).<sup>4</sup> Women might be allowed to work outside the home in a limited range of occupations, but their most important work would take place in the home. At this time Pell was not a wife or mother herself, but she was a proponent of ‘domestic feminism’ and upheld socially conservative gender roles.

The curriculum of domestic arts schools or colleges was shaped by both gender and class. Flora Pell and her supporters saw the provision of domestic arts colleges as the answer to the problem of ‘the fifteenth year’. In Victoria in the 1920s, girls and boys finished school in their 14th year, but girls were not allowed to start work in factories until they were 15 years old. Pell believed that many girls drifted, with no routine, purpose or discipline in their lives and that ‘no one ever drifts forward: the drift is always backwards’ (*Argus* 4 June 1924: 6). The locations of the new centres established during the 1920s, which Pell oversaw, were in industrial, working class suburbs. At the same time that Pell was espousing the moral benefits of a continuing education for girls, community leaders in Melbourne were concerned about the return of soldiers with venereal diseases from the First World War who drifted in and out of employment. Fearing that these young girls and returned soldiers would drift towards each other, they thought that training girls in the principles and practices of motherhood could assist in controlling the spread of venereal disease (Smart 1992: 69). To prevent young girls from developing lazy, and possibly immoral habits, Pell advocated that girls should be kept under the influence of the Education Department and made to attend domestic arts centres, for at least a couple of days a week (*Argus* 4 June 1924: 6). *Our cookery book* can be read then, as an attempt to reinforce the ideology that a woman’s most important contribution to society took place in the home and as an articulation of uncertainty about whether this would continue to be true.

### **Recipe changes in *Our cookery book***

While some recipes go in and out of fashion just like dress styles, two recipe changes in *Our cookery book* are evidence of international historical events. In her first edition, Pell includes a recipe for Belgium Pound Cake. This is a common and popular recipe for a cake made with lots of butter and dried fruits that used to be called ‘German Pound Cake’. However, by the time Pell published her book in 1916, the name had changed as a result of the anti-German sentiment generated by the First World War, and because Belgium gained the sympathy of allied nations when it was invaded by Germany in 1914, despite being neutral. Similarly, the *Queensland Presbyterian women’s missionary union cookbook*, first published in 1894, did include recipes for German biscuits, pudding and sauce but from the ninth edition onwards, (about 1917) it excised all German recipes from its cookbooks.

Another outcome from the First World War was the increase in popularity of the temperance movement, possibly due to the number of soldiers who returned from the war and took to drinking to numb the horrors of war. The membership of the Victorian branch of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) nearly trebled during the 1920s from 3118 in 1920 to 9776 members in 1930, making them the largest state branch (Smart 1998, 219). Their political power was evident after

they successfully campaigned for the closure of Victorian hotels and public bars at 6pm in 1916 and helped to convince 47 per cent of adult Victorians to vote for the reduction or abolition of liquor licenses in a referendum in 1920.<sup>5</sup>

In 1926, ten years after *Our cookery book* was first published, the WCTU discovered that school girls were using a cookbook that included half a cup of brandy in a fruit cake recipe. They lobbied the Education Department for two years and were successful in having all recipes with 'intoxicating liquor' removed from subsequent editions.<sup>6</sup> *Our cookery book* is an example of the power and persistence of the temperance movement in Australia in the 1920s.

Ironically, Flora Pell's writings about food indicate that she subscribed to the ideals and principles of the WCTU and the closely aligned Housewives Association and National Council of Women. All four encouraged women to continue in their traditional domestic role and elevated the importance of the housewife.

### Nationalism and Flora Pell's cookbooks



Fig 6. Pell, Flora c.1926 Cover of *A sunshine cookery book with 50 dried fruit recipes for the modern table*, Melbourne: Speciality Press

In 1926, the popularity of *Our cookery book* and Pell's reputation as an excellent cookery supervisor with a knowledge of nutrition led the Victorian State Dried Fruits Board to commission her to compile a booklet with recipes containing only dried



fruits. This cookbook was distributed free of charge to encourage Australians to eat more dried fruits. Ironically, this free booklet contains recipes for Christmas cake and Christmas pudding which both contain brandy! (Pell 1926: 10,18) Australians were consuming less than a quarter of the 65,000 tons of fruit produced, much of which was grown and harvested by returned soldiers. The foreword urged 'housewives' to support returned soldiers who were trying to make a living off the land (many of them on unviable soldier settler farms) by buying Australian currants, sultanas and raisins. They were also encouraged to do their duty by their families, and feed them 'bottled sunshine' as the 'remarkably high food value of raisins makes their use every day and for every meal a real economy, brightening the home with the blessing of health'. Food choices were political, even in the 1920s.

*Our cookery book* was first published in 1916, during the depths of the First World War. The war generated expressions of loyalty to the 'mother country' as well as the nation. Pell used her cookbook and her classroom to equip young girls – future mothers – for their role as 'nation builders'. In 1906 she wrote: 'the teaching of domestic economy is to be the power that makes the happy home, and the happy home means a prosperous nation, because, from the home, we must recruit our citizens' (Pell, in Long 1908: 69). With a rolling pin and a knowledge of nutrition, Pell was teaching women to raise up an army.

Pell made the link between nutritious food and healthy citizens who were ready to fight for the country long before the government did during the Second World War. They produced a series of pamphlets which declared: 'Food is a mighty weapon of war', urging families to support the war effort by growing their own vegetables and keeping their own chickens.



Fig. 7. 'Feeding the guns is not enough...We must feed more gunners too! FOOD is a Mighty Weapon of War!' Australian War Memorial, SC00590

## Conclusion

Reading between the recipes, *Our cookery book* provides insights into aspects of Australia's domestic life and social values in the early twentieth century. Flora Pell was exploring new ideas about nutrition and seeking to educate her readers about how their impact as cooks would have a ripple effect on the health of the family, society and the nation. Pell offers readers two things simultaneously: a self-image that fitted a fairly traditional female role of nurturer and homemaker, and an opportunity to embrace a new and less familiar civic role. Pell understood the political power of food choices – from eating more dried fruits to cooking without alcohol. Cookbooks offer an abundance of meanings and readings. *Our cookery book* is a subtle, yet powerful argument for domestic feminism and nationalism which also tells you how to economise when feeding the family.

## Endnotes

1. This is now the site of Collingwood College, the place where Stephanie Alexander pioneered her kitchen garden program which helps children understand the benefits of growing and cooking organic food.
2. For a full account of the battle over *Our cookery book*, see Wishart 2010
3. Flora Pell also wrote *Miss Flora Pell's tested cookery dishes and valuable home hints*, published by Specialty Press in 1925, and *A sunshine cookery book with 50 dried fruit recipes for the modern table*, published by the Victorian State Dried Fruits Board in about 1926.
4. This article, 'Training of girls', was written by 'Vesta'. Flora Pell's friend Stella Allen used the pen name 'Vesta'.
5. Referenda and plebiscites held in Victoria, compiled by Victorian Parliamentary Library, 2001. About 43 per cent of Victorians voted to abolish Liquor licenses in Victoria in 1930.
6. Intriguingly, none of the 6 editions (ranging from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 22<sup>nd</sup>) of *Our cookery book* held by the State Library of Victoria contain a recipe using alcohol. Yet the correspondence in the PROV files make it clear that the WCTU is concerned about a recipe in *Our cookery book*.

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