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### **Women's work in the transition to modernity: *The worker cook book* and *Our cookery book***

#### Abstract:

Flora Pell's *Our cookery book* and Mary Gilmore's *Worker cook book* were published at a similar time and contribute to contemporary ideas about womanhood as they were emerging during the modern period in the early decades of the Australian nation. In different ways the books politicised domestic life and sought to domesticate political life by asserting a distinct voice for women and elevating the significance of cooking. The works integrate the everyday life of women within broader societal changes. My interests are directed here towards demonstrating the role of the cookbooks in reflecting and performing the work of social transformation in the transition to modernity.

#### Biographical note:

Adele Wessell is Senior Lecturer in History at Southern Cross University. Her recent publications include co-editing with Donna Lee Brien a special issue of *M/C Journal* on the theme of 'Cookbook' (2013), with whom Adele also co-founded the Australasian Food Studies Network, an online network of food scholars and other interested individuals and groups. She is currently engaged in a project with the Landed Histories Collective on biographies of land related to changes in food production (see, <http://www.landedhistories.org>).

#### Keywords:

Food writing – Cookbooks – Modernity

Changes in food production, preparation, marketing and consumption are among the defining features of modernity impacted by industrialisation, the rise of the mass media, imperialism, globalisation and multiculturalism. However, precisely because women's activities have been neglected within dominant discourses and trivialised, those activities which they have historically had primary responsibility for – such as food production, preparation and consumption – have also been ignored until recently in historical explorations of modernity. Both women's studies and food studies have affirmed the historical importance of everyday life for its potential to address central historical questions of modernity, economics and power. As Rogers and Garrett remind us, feminism comes out of women's experiences, much of which is related to everyday life, not from theory or textbooks (2002). And yet culinary literature is often overlooked as contributing to ideas about womanhood as they were emerging during the modern period. Cookbooks are a useful site through which to interrogate these relationships, as the food production and consumption to which they are directed implicates women in a web of political, cultural and economic relationships, both shaping societal notions of gender and how women see themselves in relation to food. The part they played in integrating various aspects of women's life has largely been neglected in favour of women's writings about political subjects, thus contributing to a fragmentation that may have impeded change.

The subject of a 'new' or 'coming' woman occupied a number of Australian writers in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Beverley Kingston has attributed the gradual easing of social, political and legal restraints on women, the opening of new employment opportunities and dress reform to the appearance of the 'new woman', 'bachelor girl', 'advanced woman', 'career girl' and 'flapper' (1977: 41). Publications like *The Dawn*, self-consciously sought to bring the new woman into the story of the Australian nation, past and future. The focus of much of its analysis, however, has been on the contribution it made in arguments for women's rights. Most of the journal though was made up of beauty tips, household hints, recipes, women's stories, health ideas, fashion articles and so on (Cameron 2011). These have largely been overlooked, although Hannah Cameron's study of the journal proposes that its main goal was to dignify and inspire women through integrating feminism with popular women's interests under an ideal of womanhood (2011: 56). The *Workers Cook Book* (1914) was one of Mary Gilmore's most popular works, simultaneously promoted traditional culinary practices and a social and political reform agenda with a different vision for the future. Written in the same period, *Our Cookery Book* by Flora Pell (1916), had cooking at the centre of its reform agenda. Both texts provide insights into the role cookbooks could have in social and cultural change in the transition to modernity.

Discussions of the 'New Woman' or the 'Coming Woman' were not confined to Australia and had been going on in the United States and England for some years amongst reformers and women's advocates. However isolated Australia was in a physical sense, Australians were not removed from the forces of modernity shaping society throughout the west. The combined force of women activated in earlier campaigns for suffrage and experience of increased access to waged work and education clearly put the 'woman question' on the agenda of the new nation (Grimshaw et al. 1994: 156). But while the processes of economic, political and social

development can be traced to material and social organisation and policy, cultural processes that deal with less tangible things – meanings, values, symbols, ideas, knowledge – have been accorded a more secondary status in the explanatory hierarchy of scholarly analysis. Thus despite the importance of food as increasing in the transition to modernity, the relationship between changes in women's lives as it was manifested in food preparation and consumption and discourse has received less attention.

One exception to this is Cecilia Novero's analysis of cookbooks published in Germany, which considers how they produced an image of modernity that could encompass women without prompting any radical social or political changes in their role (2000). Through the promotion of new technologies and the focus on efficiency and saving, cooking is disassociated in these texts from tasting and pleasure. In this context, cookbooks were instrumental as a tool through which to promote modernity. The association, however, is incomplete and in the case of Australia, not straightforward. As active participants in modernity, women could also be agents in the project, contributing to, rather than just adapting to, modern society. Both shopping and cooking were strongly gendered activities in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While this represented a continuation of existing practices and attitudes, it is also possible to see that cookbooks posited a modernizing refinement and updating of gender roles. Changes in shopping and cooking that accompanied industrialisation of the home and food also promised labour-saving convenience. In the process the social responsibility of food preparation, which cookbooks espoused, elevated the significance of the role that women played in society. This would provide to be a useful – but also confined – strategy for sustaining a role for women in the public sphere.

As I have argued elsewhere (2013), cookbooks are both sources for history (as per writers such as Colin Bannerman 1996 and Donna Lee Brien 2012) and a way of recording it. In this way, cookbooks *make* history – they can be used as historical documents and examples of material culture to write histories, but they also produce change and are not merely reflective products of historical change. Even as society was undergoing change, cookbooks simultaneously affirmed the importance of the past and facilitated the transition to those changes. The dominance of women in cookbooks from the 19<sup>th</sup> century attested to the strength of the concept of separate spheres, but the consequences of this were ambiguous. From the growth in publications dealing with women's topics, also emerged a forum for women's voices. Women like Louisa Lawson, who combined political commentary with subjects seen to be of specific interest to women, such as cooking and fashion, combined a case for equality of women and men with an explicit acknowledgment of differences in their interests, roles in society and values. Modernity was experienced unevenly, rather than being an unprecedented break between past and present. This, in part, explains the complex dialogue between past and present, and between change and the maintenance of tradition, in the lives of women that are enacted within the pages of a cookbook. The individual attachments, interests and aspirations of cookbook authors also intersected with wider forces in the process of modernising and cannot be considered independent of the cultures and change of which they were a part.

The societal roles expected of women are commonly reflected in cookbooks; this is a purposeful act to attempt to promote their popularity, but it is also consistent with the lived experiences of women as the common ground on which different ideas and values of the new woman could meet. The cultural authority that Janet Theophano suggests is imbued on women through their culinary skills, may work to maintain the gendered nature of cooking (2002: 123). On the other hand, cookbooks could also serve to impact on the formation or transformation of the societal roles of the women who owned them. Certainly that was the desire of some cookbook authors motivated out of concern for the welfare of women and for change.

### ***The worker cook book***

*The worker cook book* acknowledged that it was a group effort ‘compiled from the Tried Recipes of Thrifty Housekeepers’ which came from Mary Gilmore’s Women’s Page in *The worker*, the official journal of the Australian Workers Union. Like Isabella Beeton, whose *Household management* was largely based on the column she wrote for the *English woman’s domestic magazine*, Gilmore drew on the contributions of the *Worker’s* readers who were invited to write questions, provide tips and family recipes. Gilmore was a member of William Lane’s Cosme colony in Paraguay and began the page after she had returned to Australia with her husband as a way of continuing her life of writing and political engagement with her responsibilities as a wife and mother (Monash). Women needed knowledge, she argued, but understood that it needed to be relevant and interesting to them, ‘if cookery recipes, health notes, flannel stitching, etc., will unlock the door of interest, by all means let us have them’, she wrote (qtd. in Monash).

The unity of the labour movement was a central tenet of Gilmore’s politics and the participation of women readers was an important strategy in activating them by engaging women in producing the knowledge and content of the Women’s page themselves. The Women’s page Gilmore wrote from 1908 to 1930 relied extensively on involving women actively in its production:

I would like every woman who wants help to understand things to write to me, and every woman who knows some little labour-saving way of doing things (helps to those who need help, in fact) to send in her item ... It isn’t always the woman whose name heads a page who is the creator, but the multitude of women nursing their babies and mending socks by the evening fire. And these are the ones whom, above all, I wish to reach (qtd. in Wilde 1988: 155).

The intention was clear: to provide a sense of collective ownership and attract women to the *Worker* and its cause. Gilmore’s Women’s page thus offered a mix of domestic advice and radical politics. Hundreds of recipes were contributed by women throughout Australia and New Zealand and letters from readers now preserved in the National Library of Australia Gilmore Papers attest to the popularity of her cookery and household hints section (Monash).

Gilmore’s introductory article to the first page, ‘For worker women’ affirmed the importance of domestic matters. ‘There is an idea with some (men and women alike)

that the *Worker* is purely a man's paper and that the inclusion of matter connected with the domestic (which is almost women's life) is an intrusion', she wrote. She continued by emphasising the importance of political matters to women and their role with men in the struggle for change (qtd in Ovenden 1965: 38). Gilmore did not distinguish the work she did as a patriot, feminist and political activist from her role as an educator on housewifery. Each issue allowed her to expound her radical views on questions she saw as relevant to women, alongside the provision of useful recipes, cookery hints and household remedies for such ailments as sunburn and toothache. In this way Gilmore was an exponent of 'expediency feminism', which distinguished women's politics in Australia from similar movements internationally. As Judith Allen explains, 'instead of seeking to politicise domestic life, Australian adherents of expediency feminism sought to domesticate political life' (1979: 14).

The prevailing themes of the Women's page during this time were women, children, socialism and the Labor party. Gilmore's page provided a forum for her to advocate for child endowment, aged pensions and better treatment for returned servicemen. Although she approved of professional achievement for women, she still insisted that proficiency in cooking and sewing was required. In this way, the demands of public life were put into a different perspective alongside the challenges women faced in their home life. 'The woman who can remember all the things that go into a plum pudding need have no fear of recording a vote', she wrote. 'Voting is simply nothing to having a baby, or nursing a sick child, yet some poor women tremble at the very thought of it' (qtd. in Lawson 1966: 23). While the political agenda Gilmore espoused could be appropriated to more conservative views that would maintain a subordinate role for women in mainstream politics, Gilmore asserted a voice for women that was also empowering by seeking greater access to the public sphere based on the role women might play in reforming it with their own culture and values. Proclaiming a greater authority in the body politic was ultimately integrated with various other elements of women's experiences, such as cooking to promote a holistic vision of the modern woman.

First published in 1914, *The worker cook book* was a practical guide containing 'every-day recipes of Australian housekeepers in working class homes' (foreword). This was undoubtedly one of Gilmore's most popular printed works, and yet her entry in the *Australian dictionary of biography* does not cite it (Wilde). Though remembered best as a writer and for campaigning in the *Worker* for social and economic reforms, *the worker cook book* outranked any of her volumes of verse in terms of publishing success and certainly women of the time knew her best for the 'kitchen bible' she compiled. The division imposed between politics and domestic matters has thus served to impede a full assessment of Gilmore's work. Sarah Black distinguishes the work from other community cookbooks at the time for their purpose in sharing, rather than fund-raising, as the foreword suggested:

hundreds of practical recipes sent to 'Our Women's Page' during the many years that popular feature of 'The Australian Worker' has been under Mrs Gilmore's control. They are mainly the every-day recipes of Australian housekeepers in working-class homes, and their chief value lies in their every-day usefulness (qtd. in Black 2011).

The importance of the book historically has been recognised for the insight it provides into the foodways of the Australian working class at the time. The recipes were also framed by working class politics, as Colin Bannerman has noted, 'The needs of station workers and the shearers whose industrial militancy helped form the Labor movement were well recognised' (1996: 77). While the final edition in 1923 included some new recipes, it also included well-known favourites that preserved the culinary traditions of the past, such as that for 'shed yeast', when the commercial variety was hard to come by, as well as for others for puddings, rabbit and lamingtons.

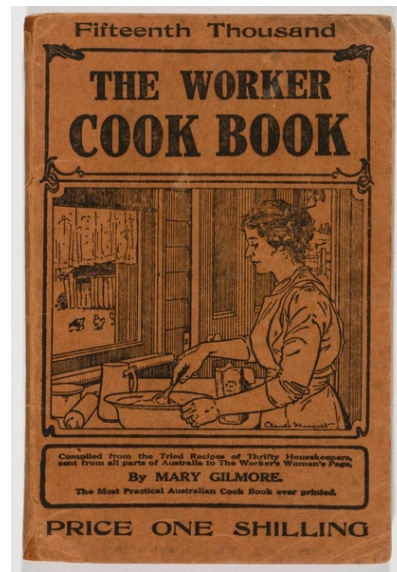


Fig. 1. *The worker cook book: compiled from the tried recipes of thrifty housekeepers sent from all parts of Australia to The Worker's woman's page* by Mary Gilmore (1917)

Although Australian women as cooks were separated by distance, they were brought together in print as contributors and as readers. Clearly, both the Women's page and the cookbook itself were ways to engage working class women in issues that were important to them. But these publications also provided a forum, and a readership, for more radical views. The purpose of the *Worker Women's* page was political; to awaken women to the importance of many reforms, but the cookbook showed a commitment to both the domestic issues that affected women as well as a faith in their ingenuity, 'because the average Australian woman can apply general rules to particular instances, and because she realises that what is applicable to a gas stove has to be modified for a camp-over and vice versa' (Gilmore 1915: preface).

By following her own example, women could also aspire to work outside the home. Gilmore reflected on women and girls moving to employment outside the customary domestic sphere, both out of necessity to provide for the family, and because she firmly believed that girls should be educated for a working life with the right to seek fulfilment of her talents outside the home if she chose. Gilmore's work traversed the boundaries between public life and domestic arts and thereby made the provision and preparation of food and the work of women more broadly matters for public discussion.

### ***Our cookery book***

*Our cookery book*, first published two years after the first edition of the *Worker cook book*, ran into twenty-four editions and was published until the 1950s. This volume was also motivated by concern for the welfare of women and to contribute to shaping change. Both books sought and attracted a wide audience and follow the expansion of systematic instruction in cooking, as with the general change towards ways of producing and classifying knowledge which characterised the modern nation through the extension of universal education. Both authors assume cooking is something that can be taught and that their books provide more than blueprints for meals. In their public roles and through their writing, Pell and Gilmore imbued readers with both the general principles of cooking and a strong sense of the importance of cooking and eating beyond the kitchen. They also promoted education more generally. Critics of domestic science at the time argued that cooking was something girls could and should learn at home from their mothers and was a waste of time and money in schools (Kingston 1996: 98). Indeed, if cooking and food preparation was such a natural and fulfilling activity for women, the teaching of domestic science was redundant. Contemporary cookbooks can be read then, not just as evidence of attitudes about women's role at the time and the security of domestic ideology, but an articulation of uncertainty about these norms and anxiety about their endurance. Asserting a separate and specific voice for women, which had been successful in gaining civil rights, could be a useful – but also confining – strategy for sustaining an authoritative voice for women in the new nation's identity.

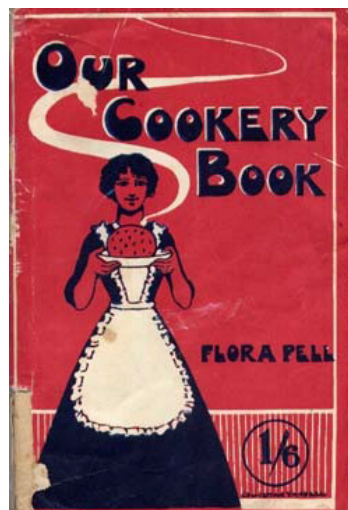


Fig. 2. Flora Pell's *Our Cookery Book* 8th ed, 1924

*Our cookery book* was written as a textbook to teach the general principles and techniques of contemporary cookery – the basic preparations for meals that were common at the time. But the book was also more broadly educational; written to promote change in both the status of cooking and eating, and those who were providing it. By the time *Our cookery book* was published in 1916, Pell had already been teaching for twenty-five years. She had overseen the development of cookery centres in state schools in Victoria from 1912, and the text was intended to replace the

more limited recipe cards used in schools up to that point. *Our cookery book* also became a more informal home cookery textbook and was thus used by mothers and daughters alike. Recent responses from readers suggest it has had an enduring value, with a number describing it as ‘a bible’ and Flora Pell as part of their lives (Wishart 2011).

When *Our cookery book* was first published in 1916, paths other than marriage or domestic service were opening up for young women. ‘There are telephone-girls, typewriting-girls, shop-girls, tea-room girls, University students, art students, dressmakers, and milliners’, one observer wrote (Clowes 1911, in Kingston 1977: 42). While these opportunities were limited, they still challenged the then entrenched notion that a woman’s place was in the home. At this time the leaving age for girls to exit school was 14, although they were not allowed to enter the workforce for another year. Pell argued strongly for cookery and needlework lessons in schools and the development of domestic arts colleges. She decried the fact that girls were not displaying the same aptitude for domestic duties as their mothers and grandmothers (*Argus* 1922: 4). In 1915, the Victorian Education Department responded to public pressure for more domestic training for girls and established two domestic arts colleges – one in Bell Street, Fitzroy, and the other in Collingwood, where Flora Pell was appointed Head Mistress. A domestic arts course which provided ‘systematic and comprehensive training that should enable them to become efficient homekeepers’ was regarded by the Education Department as far more relevant for female students than ordinary secondary school, as they were likely to marry, which would mean forfeiting one’s place in the paid workforce (PROV VPRS 3854/PO/1).

Pell firmly believed that a girl’s education was incomplete if she hadn’t been trained in the principles of what she called ‘True Household Economy’, cookery and nutrition aspects of housework which were covered in detail in *Our cookery book*. Pell believed that girls were ‘the guardians of the future’ and that there was a link between training girls to be wise mothers who ran efficient and effective households and cared for the physical, mental and moral health of their children and the prevention of juvenile crime (*Argus* 1924: 6). 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. While Pell was not a wife or mother herself, she upheld socially conservative gender roles. Conversely, Pell articulated a voice for women that also asserted that the interests, however she may have limited these, were not subordinate to men’s in the new nation.

This female role was certainly not diminished in importance by its focus on the domestic realm. Pell believed that nation-building started in the kitchen and wrote in 1906, ‘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’ (1908: 69). This makes even more sense when it is recognised that *Our cookery book* was first published during the height the First World War and, like Mary Gilmore, Pell espoused a contemporary expression of patriotism. The war generated support for such expressions of loyalty to both the ‘mother country’ as well as the nation and the recipes in these two volumes clearly drew on British traditions as well as marking a movement towards food more suited to



locally available ingredients, climate and lifestyle. In this way, Pell believed that women had a vital role to contribute to the nation's prosperity through their role as homemakers. In her words, 'the housekeeper is in a position to wield a tremendous influence on the mind and body, hence upon the family, society, and the nation' (1925: 5). The womanhood ideal which Pell promoted can be seen as contributing to the construction of women's identity as part of the formation of the nation, through which women would seek greater access to the public sphere by influencing it with their private sphere morals and values.

When Pell was promoted to Inspectress of Domestic Arts Colleges in 1924, *The Argus* claimed that 'probably no woman has had greater influence than her on the promotion of domestic happiness among the younger generation in Victoria', which by that time comprised 'the greater proportion of householders of today' (1916: 12–13). *Our Cookery Book* was thus more than a collection of recipes, to both its author and readers. Pell was contributing to much broader debates about the role of women in a period of significant change in the nation. Its success – as well as the controversy which surrounded its use as an unauthorised textbook and the criticism it received from the Women's Christian Temperance Union for using alcohol – reflects both the importance of cookbooks at this time and the contemporary anxiety over gender roles and domestic science.<sup>1</sup> Like other works in print, *Our cookery book* could be appropriated to different ends, and here provides insight into national loyalties, the role of women, the citizen subject and education for women.

## Conclusion

Gilmore and Pell were both primarily housewifery educators, linking women's work inside the home to its wider political significance and defining women's domestic responsibilities as a social obligation of national importance. Both their cookery books were intended for a broad audience and, like many of the other cookbooks of this time, were concerned with providing instructions for producing nutritious and economical dishes. The idea that such cooking itself could be a social responsibility is significant in terms of the timing of the books' publication. Gilmore's most popular book enlisted cooking as a means of educating women. For Pell, educating girls about cooking was itself a key role in their full participation as citizens. Good food, labour saving tips, advice on health and economy were key themes central to their vision of women in the modern nation.

Cookbooks in some ways thus reflected the changing tastes of the public, their ideas, what they were doing and their own lifestyles. But these cookbooks also helped to promote those changes too. *Our cookery book* was still being published in the 1950s. The last edition of the *The Workers cook book* was published in 1923, by which time 35,000 copies had been sold (Brien 2012). There are only minor changes in the content during that time, which suggests a certain amount of stability in particular aspects of women's lives. That these basic cookery skills needed to be communicated at all, however, suggests that there was an audience for this knowledge in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gilmore and Pell's works were directed towards women's role in the home and specifically the kitchen. Their audience and their values are communicated through the cover illustrations on existing copies (see Figs. 1 and 2 above). On both covers, a woman is seen alone and engaged with preparing and presenting food. They could both be involved in the popular act of mixing and baking. The historical significance of the books, however, is not evident from the covers.

Commitment to good nutrition, domestic hygiene and economy are expressed in both their works, although many of the recipes are different. In various ways such cooking literature also extended the obligations of shopping and cooking into public life. While this might have prescribed women's identity and role as homemakers and their domestic responsibilities as obligations of citizenship, it also clearly defined food production and consumption as political, cultural and economic matters. As such, this literature is deserving of attention for the way it contributed to, and reflected, central historical questions of modernity, economics and power.

The very public nature of cookbooks thus makes them important to historians. Cookbooks are held more often in private collections than public institutions and used in the home for many years after their publication. Beyond the kitchen, Pell and Gilmore spread their influence through their various publications, as well as in public lectures and through appearances on radio. While Pell advocated a restricted role for women, it was one in which they had a strong sense of belonging both socially and politically and one in which private and public concerns converged. Gilmore campaigned for women's right to work outside the home but also believed that a woman's life was incomplete without knowledge of cooking and sewing. In writing specifically for and about women Gilmore and Pell helped to construct a sense of belonging which defined them as part of a community and set them apart from men, in their represented differences, but equal in terms of their access to the public sphere.

The value both women placed on the home and on food's production and consumption in particular finds some contemporary resonance in the food movement, wherein the civic and moral dimensions of all aspects of food in our lives remain a concern. Almost a hundred years ago, both women understood the way that food traverses the boundaries between public and private, between the broader community and home. They understood how the political dimension of food making made it a source of civic and personal responsibility, and sought to harness that to asserting an authoritative voice for women in the nation.

Sian Supski has suggested that cooking is a thoughtful practice, requiring a certain amount of knowledge and 'training', which accumulates over time (2005). Pell and Gilmore clearly directed their work towards women and in that focus used the language of a separate sphere of interest and influence to assert women's role in the home as a political one. They offered readers two things simultaneously: a self-image that fitted the traditional female role of nurturer and homemaker, but also an opportunity to embrace a new and less familiar civic role. Our relationship to food as it is expressed in cookbooks thus provides insights both to our past and our present, taking the value of food writing clearly beyond the kitchen to what it communicates much more broadly about our society and our attitudes.

While scholars continue to speak of ‘precursors’ and ‘forerunners’ of feminism which confine the articulation of women’s rights or assertion of their interests to a particular period, the efforts of many women are relegated as less important. Such a practice effectively deflects analysis of important historical issues and figures. Moreover if we ignore the work of women in providing household hints, recipes, health ideas and advice on fashion as somehow less important than arguments provided for women’s rights we also subordinate women’s interests in the past to the subjects that have traditionally occupied historians, such as politics and labour. The work of Pell and Gilmore highlight the way in which discourse on women’s rights could be integrated with other aspects of womanhood. It part this provides a case for looking at artefacts such as cookbooks for the contribution they made to the formation of modernity, reflecting and performing the work of social transformation.

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1. For more scholarship on Flora Pell, see Wishart 2010, and Wishart and Wessell 2010.

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