

HAGEN, A. 1994 (1992, 1993): *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food, Processing and Consumption*. Oxford: Anglo-Saxon Books. The 1994 edition has a comprehensive index.

A specialised press, a small press, an interesting book. As the author indicates in her abstract-preface: “As Anglo-Saxon Food: Processing & Consumption has not been treated as the main subject of any similar multidisciplinary research before ...”, she has set out to do the treating through both primary and secondary sources. That is, she has drawn on archaeology, classical and medieval documents as well as literary texts, studies related to biochemistry and ethnography. It could even be said that, almost inadvertently, Ann Hagen includes spin-offs from current feminist theory.

The book itself is what it claims to be—a handbook. It smacks of a doctoral dissertation too close to its writing, with a scaffolding of notes and references that seems all too apparent. This might have been avoided by a careful rewriting with an too to weaving at least some of the referrals to other authorities into the text itself. The reading could have become smoother and more engaging if more than a subject-verb-complement syntax had been used. Even with a handbook both this syntactical scheme coupled with a tendency to use various repetitions of the exact same quote to make practically the exact same point seem awkward. One of these quotes, perhaps the most bothersome, is the reference to the baker taken from the *Colloquy*. On three occasions we hear the baker answering the question: ‘Can we live without you?’ with ‘You may for a period of time, not for long, or very well. Indeed without my trade every table would seem empty, and without bread all food turns to loathing.’ (p. 71, 94 and 121). Although the quote is used with varying emphasis, it is the same quote. Yet, with a handbook as with a dictionary, consecutive reading is not the primary aim. Supposedly, this type of reiteration, used on several occasions with other citations, can be excused.

Apart from the few stylistic drawbacks of this 189-page book, the effect of the whole is one of interest and enjoyment. The author is not at all stingy with her use of Old English text backups, nor does she make the person who

is unfamiliar with the! reading of such texts suffer. She diligently and generously translates the texts into contemporary English. This is, in fact, part of the fun for those of us whose Anglo-Saxon has gone rusty. For those who find ohs and ahs in the discovery of etymology that shows relationships to present-day usage, there are numerous occasions to be delighted: “*beorma* (yeast)” has its relatives in our beer and brew. (p. 15)

From records of wills, and gifts, and orders for monasteries and noble feasts, Ann Hagen had deduced the importance and frequency of certain foodstuffs as well as their all-over or seasonal availability. She gives us recipes from the medicinal *Leechdoms, recipes*, some of which make us chuckle, others which sound surprisingly familiar. Her editorial comments are few, yet at some points we are led to the conclusion that the Anglo-Saxons had greater culinary imagination than their later conquerors, the Normans. “The Anglo-Saxon cuisine seems to have made use of herbs, fruits, and to a lesser extent, flowers as an accompaniment to meat.” (p. 121).

The descriptions of hunger, especially when related to women and children, are often emotionally heightened as well. Yet our author remains straightforward in treating what she set out to treat: Processing and Consumption of Food in Anglo-Saxon times. Her table of contents run through such topics as “Drying, Milling and Bread Making” “Dairying,” “Butchery,” “Preservation & Storage” and “Methods of Cooking.” In the section on consumption, subjects such as “Food Shortages and Deficiency Diseases.” and “Adulteration: Damage Caused by dietary Elements” remind us somehow that what our modern age looks back to with nostalgia is all but nonsensical. People have always tried to adulterate and preserve food with one method or another, and often these were and are harmful to some degree. It seems that starving was and is worse,

Besides the handbook itself, which is a demonstration of careful and orderly thinking, the author offers then four fecund appendices on subjects related to food customs: A treats *Fasting*; B, *Fasting by Saints* and *Fasting as Penance*; C, *Entertainment at Feasts* with a section on minstrels, one on musicians, and one on dancing, juggling and jesting. *Appendix D* offers a chronology of famine years from 439 through 1099. Finally, the index is complete and well cross-referenced, and the Bibliography is rich in suggestions for further inquiry.

For a study of monastic, courtly, town, and family systems of living and eating this book is recommendable. It is full of details that enlighten our understanding both of the Anglo-Saxons over several centuries, and the importance they gave to the second and third of human needs: thirst and hunger for mere survival, and then that need that invites us to survive, the need for aesthetic and entertainment.

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