

Eat Better, Not Less: Contextualising Clean Eating in Contemporary History – Food GRP

In recent years there has been a marked rise in a new form of disordered eating. Orthorexia nervosa was a term initially coined in 1996, referring to symptoms of patients who were obsessed with healthy eating and food purity, rather than body size and weight as seen in cases of anorexia and bulimia nervosa.¹ Recent popular interest in ‘clean eating’ along with the rise of health gurus supported through expanding social media networks, often with questionable nutritional qualifications such as Ella Mills (*Deliciously Ella*) and Madeleine Shaw, has been cited as the cause of an outbreak of orthorexia nervosa.² Current medical discourse on the illness presents it as a modern development in the wider history of eating disorders. Through my PhD research, I aim to cast a new light on orthorexia nervosa and clean eating, understanding it not as something entirely new dependent on the age of social media, but rather as part of a long history of obsession with dieting and healthy eating.

My work builds on historical studies of dieting and eating disorders in order to explore the relationship between the individual, the body, wider culture and society, and food – and importantly, how these relationships become disordered.³ Using a variety of primary sources including cookbooks, diet books, and social media, I aim to answer the fundamental

¹ Karin Kratina, ‘Orthorexia Nervosa’, *National Eating Disorders Association* (2016) <<https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/orthorexia-nervosa>> [Date accessed: 29 September 2017].

² Bee Wilson, ‘Why We Fell for Clean Eating’, *Guardian* (11 August 2017) <<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/aug/11/why-we-fell-for-clean-eating>> [Date accessed: 29 September 2017].

³ See: Margaret Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988); Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985).

question: can clean eating and orthorexia nervosa be understood as part of a wider history of dieting and disordered eating, furthered by contemporary obsessions with social media and influencers, as current medical literature would suggest? Or rather, is it part of a longer cultural obsession with our own health and diet? In order to answer these questions, I look primarily at why clean eating became popular; how clean eating became popular; and how clean eating became disordered.

My PhD is broadly split into two sections – the first section examines the rise, and subsequent fall, of clean eating. In this section, I firstly examine links between clean eating and vegetarian activism, curative eating for health, and concerns over food quality and food scandals. Secondly, I study the use of social media and blogging platforms to turn clean eating into a popular movement, different from its origins as a detox diet. Finally, I study the backlash against clean eating in which famous clean eaters actively distanced themselves from the movement, falling against a backdrop of twenty-first century body positivity and fat activism.

The second section of my research looks at the rise of orthorexia nervosa. I first question how eating disorders come to exist, both in the psychiatric sphere and the public imagination, looking at historical studies of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Secondly, I look at the medicalising of obsession. I am particularly interested in the tipping point between understanding something like clean eating as a fad or a lifestyle choice and understanding it as obsessive to the point of unhealthy psychological behaviour. Finally, I use memoirs and social media to analyse the role of knowledge-sharing and awareness-raising in creating legitimacy for a new form of disordered eating.

Ultimately, this thesis will address the relationship between healthy eating and disordered eating. By examining the point of intersection between clean eating and orthorexia nervosa, this work will add to both the literature of eating disorders and the history of health, food and dieting.

Biography

Louise Morgan is a second-year PhD candidate at the University of Warwick. Based in the Centre for the History of Medicine, her research focuses on the historical and cultural context of orthorexia nervosa. Her thesis looks to examine the rise in the popularity of 'clean eating' through the use of cookbooks, mass media, and the Internet. The thesis aims to question the links between this growth and the construction of disordered eating surrounding health food and healthy lifestyles in the past thirty years.