

Useful Soup for Benevolent Purposes: the Politics of Domestic Economy in Nineteenth Century Britain

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Introduction

Manuals of domestic economy may suggest the dominance of domesticity in middle-class culture but it is possible to provide a more politicised interpretation of these texts by locating them as evidence of the emergence of a 'bourgeois' subject. They demonstrate how far political concerns had penetrated the household, the endorsement of women's education, the promotion of national and class identities, and the treatment of servants and the poor.

The politics of domestic economy

Concerns with class, as well as with gender, ethnicity, and nationhood, were threaded through the pages of the domestic economy manuals. This was apparent in their preoccupation with providing guidance on the welfare and management of the poor.

On the whole the attitude to the poor presented in these texts hovered between pity for their poverty-stricken state and fear of their immorality, disease, and squalor.

The authors were keen to demonstrate that their stance on the poor was based on sound intellectual principles rather than using anecdotes or emotions to govern their viewpoints. In particular, they employed the science of political economy to inform their approach.

Mostly there was an air of superiority towards the poor but some texts made fun of this self-righteous approach.

USEFUL SOUP FOR BENEVOLENT PURPOSES.

INGREDIENTS.—

- An ox-cheek, any pieces of trimmings of beef, which may be bought very cheaply (say 4 lbs.),
- a few bones, any pot-liquor the larder may furnish,
- 1/4 peck of onions,
- 6 leeks,
- a large bunch of herbs,
- 1/2 lb. of celery (the outside pieces, or green tops, do very well);
- 1/2 lb. of carrots,
- 1/2 lb. of turnips,
- 1/2 lb. of coarse brown sugar,
- 1/2 a pint of beer,
- 4 lbs. of common rice, or pearl barley;
- 1/2 lb. of salt,
- 1 oz. of black pepper,
- a few raspings,
- 10 gallons of water.

Time.—6-1/2 hours. **Average cost,** 1-1/2d. per quart.

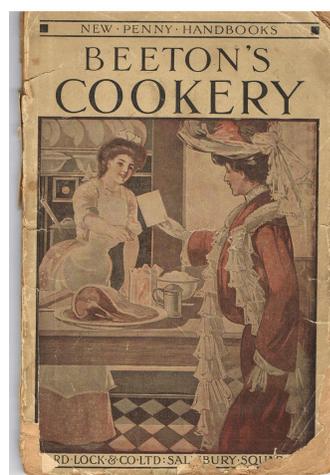
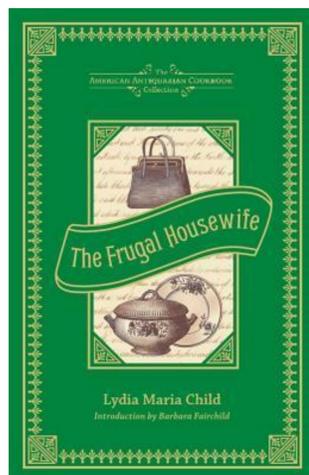
Note.—The above recipe was used in the winter of 1858 by the Editress, who made, each week, in her copper, 8 or 9 gallons of this soup, for distribution amongst about a dozen families of the village near which she lives. The cost, as will be seen, was not great; but she has reason to believe that the soup was very much liked, and gave to the members of those families, a dish of warm, comforting food, in place of the cold meat and piece of bread which form, with too many cottagers, their usual meal, when, with a little more knowledge of the "cooking." art, they might have, for less expense, a warm dish, every day.

Conclusions

Relatively few women had access to, or engaged directly with, the major works of political economy. Yet the popular domestic economy manuals graced the shelves of most middle-class kitchens and parlours as the circulation figures and frequent re-editions demonstrate.

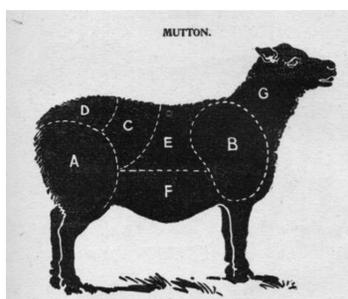
Many were found in the cottages and dwellings of the working class, and numerous girls encountered them in their schoolrooms as part of the compulsory curriculum. Interwoven with the recipes, advice, and tips on household management were discussions and debates on key public policy matters of the day: the role of the state; the treatment of the poor; the care of the sick and elderly. Much of the discussion was fully referenced, drawing on classic political and economic texts, and alluded to issues of class, gender, ethnicity, and nationhood.

Thus, an assessment of the apparently unpromising territory of domestic economy books, in fact reveals the home to be a formative site of middle-class female political action. There were direct connections between the home and pressure groups such as the anti-slavery movement or the anti-Corn Law campaign which encouraged politically-inspired consumption patterns. However, it is in the variety of indirect links where the rich texture of nineteenth-century political culture may be fully explored.



References

- Floyd, Janet and Foster, Laurel, eds (2003), *The Recipe Reader: Narratives – Contexts – Traditions*
- Richardson, Sarah (2013), *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Political Culture in Nineteenth Century Britain*



Key Sources

- [Christian Isobel Johnstone], *The Cook and Housewife's Manual* (1829)
- Lydia Child, *The Frugal Housewife* (1829)
- Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management* (1861)