

Halligan's Love Affair with Food

Anne Holden Rønning

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Abstract: Marion Halligan's non-fiction *Eat My Words*, (1990), *Cockles of the Heart* (1996) and *The Taste of Memory* (2004) all have food as their main topic. Travelling round Europe on culinary journeys and staying in hotels and flats she provides us, as readers, with a wealth of recipes and reflections on the role food plays in people's lives, socially and culturally. This article will discuss some few of the points Halligan raises as she comments on the pleasure of food; on bricolage, both in the finished product and in cookery books; and the language we use to describe food and its processes. Adopting a bicultural approach Halligan compares Australian foods of today with those of her childhood, thus turning these food books into a kind of autobiography.

Keywords: food; pleasure; bricolage and cookery books; naming.

In *Eat My Words* Marion Halligan cites Alexis Soyer in his 1853 book *The Pantropheon* as being "fond of saying that people only eat to live when they don't know how to live to eat," thus underscoring the importance of food culturally and historically. To these words Halligan adds: "Chefs, whose livelihood is other's eating, know that the best food begins in the mind" (209). The phrase 'food for thought' has a multitude of meanings that provide mental stimulus for the intellect, but it also expresses the ambiguity of everything related to food. Not only does it refer to real food, but it also has a metaphorical interpretation, as well as a symbolic and cultural context. Food tells us much about the person who buys it, who eats it, and who cooks it. The ambiguity of the concept 'food' is well illustrated by the fact that food in one country or even part of a country is unthinkable in another, or may even be a delicacy elsewhere. Examples are snails, dried mutton ribs (Norwegian Christmas dish), smoked sheep's head (a speciality in the small town of Voss, Norway), offal, which as Halligan points out is called 'variety meats' in America (*EMW* 95, 98), the "throwaway bits and [yet] highly prized delicacies" (99). Reasons for the choice of food vary from those based on religion, availability, and tradition (eg. meat v. fish) – you take what you can get. There is such a variety of topics one might discuss in relation to Halligan and food that the

choice has to be limited. Here I shall concentrate on three aspects of food that Halligan takes up in her writing: food as pleasure, mental and physical; food as bricolage and cookery books as socio-cultural sources; and the naming of food.

In one 2006 edition of *Kunapipi* "The Kookbook" Anne Collett sees food as "a barometer of well-being — of the body and the body politic;" and stresses "the place of food in literature and the literature of food, of which the recipe itself is a literary form in its own right" (viii). Marion Halligan's texts, full of witty twists, are a brilliant source of literary references to food, demonstrate a vast knowledge of the historical aspects of food, and can be seen as examples interpolated into a discussion on food and travel otherwise more structurally coherent. Food also provides her with the opportunity to give the reader a wealth of recipes, sometimes comparing Australian ones with others; and to focus on particular foods, such as the section in *Cockles of the Heart* on Chocophilia (171-5) where Halligan describes chocolate as "a mind-bending substance so people get addicted to it" (170). She relates how chocolate was originally a drink for warriors and was brought to Spain by the Aztecs, for whom "cocoa beans were a unit of currency" (173), yet the beans were thrown overboard by Dutch and English sailors since they resembled sheep shit!

Food is an essential aspect of any literature, especially in novels, where Halligan sees its use as "never simply vicarious, [but] essential to the experience of the work of art" (*ToM* 100). From the Bible onwards, when Eve ate the apple in the Garden of Eden, food has played a central role in texts, often illustrative of specific characteristics of an individual, for example Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch in Shakespeare. The centrality of the Madhatter's Tea-party in *Alice in Wonderland* and of honey in the Pooh stories are other notable literary texts associated with food, as is the use of it as a leitmotif in fairytales, especially those connected to cruelty and death, for example, Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and the gingerbread house, Little Red Riding Hood, just to mention some. Katherine Mansfield's short story "Bliss" has a meal as the structural framework of the story. Bertha's husband, Harry, is described as loving "to talk about food and to glory in his 'shameless passion for the white flesh of the lobster' and 'the green of pistachio ices – green and cold like the eyelids of Egyptian dancers'" (1974, 104). The colour of the pistachio ice is symbolic of the way Bertha sees Miss Fulton and the pear-tree in the moonlight.

One way of looking at Halligan's treatment of food is to see it as gastrocriticism. One of the pioneers of this field is the French critic Ronald Tobin. In November 2008 he gave a lecture at UCSB entitled "Thought for Food: Literature and Gastronomy" in which he discusses the term gastro-criticism. Although anthropologists and sociologists have seen food as an interplay between cultures and people, says Tobin, literary critics have devoted few pages to the study of self-nourishment in literature until recently. Although Tobin's focus is on comedy in Molière, he indicates the extensive use of food in literature from Homer onwards and identifies the commonality of expressions related to food, but which have also other connotations such as hunger, desire, consummation. The sharing of a meal, biblical breaking of bread and communion, all typify the transformation of food into something else, and are frequently expressive of joy and pleasure. Referring to 19th and 20th century novels he speaks of the language of cuisine as "a dossier of the age." He cites Rousseau;

“To read while eating was always my fantasy” – a form of etiquette considered socially unacceptable. Gastrocriticism thus also brings to light the follies of etiquette.

We can ask why Halligan is so concerned with food in her writing. Is she practising gastro-criticism, attempting to show the importance of food as a theme, a symbol, and a metaphor for aspects of society and social norms; the physical reality and mental stimulus? The answer may lie in the manner in which Halligan portrays food as a thematic link between places, and expresses an obvious desire to inform her readers, as well as the conversational tone she adopts. For example, in *Eat My Words*, after a discussion on seafood, referring to the cockle shell worn by pilgrims to Compostella, she suddenly concludes the paragraph with the following sentence relating to the nursery rhyme: “Goodness knows what Mary Mary quite contrary was up to with her silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row” (98). Such side remarks to an audience are almost theatrical, and illustrate what one might call the ‘chatty’ aspect of her writing, and the fun of reading it. It is as if she is talking to us directly. Another example from *The Taste of Memory* is “Take a little wine for thy stomach’s sake says the Bible. And we do. Not just for our stomachs but our arteries and our Alzheimers” (209).

The other answer is that to her food is such an essential part of her existence that the food eaten and the memories of that experience have autobiographical significance as is evident in her book written with Lucy Frost, *Those Women Who Go to Hotels* (1997). As she herself says in a comment in *The Taste of Memory*:

I knew I wanted *Eat My Words* to be a book about food, not just recipes but stories, the kind of thing readers could enjoy without feeling it was mainly a catalogue of recipes they were failing to cook; food as idea and history and above all words. But it wasn’t till it came back from the printer (...) that I realised it was also an autobiography. (10)

The non-fiction texts make this aspect of her writing very apparent, in that they show the many places she has lived. The comparative approach introduces us to some of her childhood experiences, yet also illustrates how her life today has become so much more international and multicultural.

Food and Pleasure

Philosophers have discussed food in relation to the terms of the pleasure derived, its temporality and value. Much has been written on asceticism, fasting and the rejection of food to attain a higher mental state, and mastery of the self. In her book *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food* (1996) Elizabeth Telfer discusses both the qualitative and quantitative views on the pleasure of food, as expressed, for example, by Plato in *Gorgias*: “Plato claims that seeking pleasure from food is self-defeating: a person who does this is never satisfied, and gets less pleasure each time” (27, cf. Plato *Gorgias* 1979:491c-4c). In the *Republic* Plato expounds on the false pleasures of food which though satisfying hunger

does not necessarily give lasting pleasure. Though we share with the animals the need for food, as humans we also have mental visions of food — colour, taste, smell — all of which are dominant features, contributive to our response, and often provide structure and symbolism in a text as, for example, in Halligan's *Spidercup* (1990). The philosopher John Stuart Mill debated the pleasure of food in relation to ideas of higher (intellectual) and lower (physical) pleasure as expressed in theories of Utilitarianism, where the moral worth of anything is determined by its outcome. What is the pleasure of food, the consequences of eating? The positive and negative aspects of food are often seen in the work of nineteenth century writers, especially Dickens, with their detailed descriptions of feasts and banquets — the negative aspects being visible in a book such as *A Christmas Carol*. The sharing of a meal can be the cause of pleasure, may create a mood or convey an idea, but is also the site of disagreement as the number of scenes at table in many contemporary soap operas show. The pleasure of food also includes sexuality, food as a metaphor for desire and lust. As Tobin comments, eating is often a substitute for sex in literature, especially in the theatre, (eg. Shakespeare, Molière). One example of this is the scene in Fielding's *Tom Jones* where Mrs. Waters and Tom eat, literally gobble, chicken in a scene full of sexual innuendos, and brilliantly portrayed in the film of the book.

Eating practices are one aspect in the defining of identities, since food and memory are closely linked. As we all know the smell of food is associated with certain occasions, it brings back memories of pleasure or sadness, associates food with events. As Halligan says, "Food is so much about memory, about the past, and about happiness in the past — unless we were very unlucky" (*ToM* 149) yet "I think that one doesn't have a gastronomic memory (*EMW* 11). This last point is debatable. What do we mean by a gastronomic memory? Is it an exact recalling of something experienced, or is it, like all memory selective? The association of place and food is strong in most cultures, albeit the memory may be false, or more often glorified. Stories of migrancy confirm this. Food tells us much of the migrant's personality, as Merlinda Bobis says "eating becomes a ritual of remembering (...) a symbolic homecoming" (*Kunapipi* 28:2, 11). Not only does the way food is prepared indicate our origins, but also the implements we use to consume that food, and the way in which we hold them, can be confirmation of belonging, displacement, or even difference. As Jonathan Highfield states "On a most basic level, (...), food has the ability to remember home, to reconstruct cultural memory from the integration of ingredients, seasonings, and preparations" (*Kunapipi* 28:2, 43). People of bicultural backgrounds are particularly aware of these small differences which reveal that they belong to another culture than the one they are currently living in. This leitmotif in Halligan's work is frequently associated with travel and specific places or areas, particularly her beloved France, and is a central trope in the autobiographical aspect of her work. For example *Cockles of the Heart*, which Halligan says is about "the two most important things (...): food and stories" (265), is a pilgrimage along the way to Compostella, which they never reach. However rather than a religious one, it is a pilgrimage of "architecture and food" (9). After crossing the Pyrenees Marion and Cosmo find not only the food (tapas) not to their liking (she prefers 3-course meals she says in *Cockles of the Heart*) but linguistic problems arise. Since the only way to reach Compostella in the time available would be by driving the motorway, thus thwarting their travelling aims which are to see and enjoy historical

places en route, and not least, sample the particular local food and wine, they return to France.

The short story “The Living Hothouse” is a good example of Halligan’s use of food. The epigraph from Charles Gérard’s *L’Ancienne Alsace à Table* reads:

The goose is nothing, but man has made of it an instrument for the output of a marvellous product, a kind of living hothouse in which grows the supreme fruit of gastronomy (198).

This “supreme fruit” is *foie gras*, and it functions as the structural element in the story for “[as] usual with Liz’s dinner parties the food was the conversation” (198), and it provided “much wit, much amusement” (207). *Foie gras* is not exactly the most appetising dish to look at, pinkish grey as it is. Halligan’s description of the conversation is full of irony, contrasting Ingrid’s sympathy for the goose that was killed with Simon’s reply: ““This is the goose’s finest hour. This is what it lived for. It was never free until this moment”” (*TLH* 200). Halligan uses the topic to criticize the cultural snobbery of Australians. One of the Australian women at the party, Harriet, decides that she will keep a goose in their place outside Canberra and feed it the right ingredients to make their own *foie gras*. However, she has second thoughts about the project when her husband, Tony, finds an old nineteenth century book, *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine d’Alexandre Dumas*, with sordid details of the torture of forced feeding implemented on the geese to gain the correct flavour: nuts, nothing to drink, feet nailed to the floor, etc. This book contains, Halligan tells us, among other descriptions, a petition “on behalf of the geese of Strasbourg to the chamber of peers” comparing their treatment with that given to British beasts and Irish poultry (*TLH* 205). Halligan thus satirizes the attitudes of those who think that European specialities are superior. Of course after feeding it up, when it came to the issue no one could kill the goose, (who was named Alexandra), and so “Alexandra finally died of obesity,” — Halligan having the last laugh (*TLH* 209).

Food as bricolage

As Tobin points out cooking is a process of metamorphosis and illusion, and the chef a kind of Prometheus playing with fire. Just as ragout is a hotchpotch of ingredients, so Halligan posits that both the work of the cook and that of the poet/writer is bricolage – cooking too is a creative art. The very language of food indicates bricolage. We ‘dress’ a chicken, and a salad for example. In *Eat My Words* Halligan has a whole chapter devoted to bricolage, which she calls do-it-yourself food, giving different recipes as examples, from yoghurt which, when used in various ways, becomes something quite different, to mulberries, plums and Calamondin oranges, pickled onions and sorrel tart, interspersed with historical details of the flora and fauna of Canberra, and literary references from the Old Testament onwards. This chapter is bricolage writ large. Throughout *Eat My Words* she is playing on the idea that basic traditional foods such as a roast of beef, leg of lamb are a contrast to the many

contemporary dishes which are a mixture of many kinds of food, as well as colours. One of Halligan's witty examples of bricolage is food for great occasions and its historical traditions, such as the elaborate metamorphoses that occur to even simple food such as jelly, especially in nineteenth century England. Wedding cakes, "at which Australia is a world champion" (119), provide some of the most horrendous examples of bricolage that have been produced (71-75), as many of us have seen.

The bricolage aspect of food is also seen in the artistic presentation of food in modern cookbooks, not least the illustrations, and in TV cookery competitions (cf. *BBC Masterchef Goes Large*). Roland Barthes discusses the function of cookbooks as sociocultural sources, "pictures (...) are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it" (1972, 110). Cookery illustrations are a kind of metalanguage (114) creating a kind of myth as to what food should look like, since all pictures have an element of myth — something which we believe exists but seldom can be proved in the making (115). The pictures do not represent the reality of the food, but signify it (137). They are, he says, written for a particular group, such as to whet the appetite of the working class woman rather than produce a dish. Halligan compares Barthes' ideas with her own and those in middleclass French magazines and weeklies. She agrees with Barthes that recipe books are addressed to the mind, and elaborates on the appeal of cookery books to the mind and the vision in the chapter "Given Names" in *Eat My Words*, thus supporting Barthes' thesis that one of the aims of cookbooks is to present an 'idea'.

Cookbooks are the history of cooking and housekeeping, the most renowned being Mrs. Beeton whose first edition was entitled *Household Management*. A change of title has not vastly changed the content over a seventy-year period, and we still have a section in the 1966 edition on, for example, "Routine of the Home."

The careful housewife will take the opportunity afforded by the annual turn-out to check over household equipment and stocks of all kinds, sorting out and setting aside articles which can be repaired or renovated, and arranging for the disposal of things no longer needed. (1966, 11)

The chapters on "The Housewife" (9-14), "Kitchen Craft: The Cooking of Food" (45-77) represent specific lifestyles, especially the first version of this classic text. But this was all part of a long tradition.

When living in England in the 1970s Halligan came across some old cookbooks from the seventeenth century onwards — all written by women "Mrs. Beeton everybody knows, but there's also Hannah Glasse, Maria Rundell, Elizabeth Raffald, Eliza Acton" (*EMW* 105). Halligan tells us about Elizabeth Raffald: "an astonishing person" who had various careers, including establishing "Manchester's first post office", but was well known for her recipes in *The Experienced English Housekeeper* (1769). Mrs. E. Smith's *The Compleat Housewife or Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion* (1729) has a wealth of herbal and other recipes which Halligan tells us the facsimile publishers warn people to follow at their own risk. In *The Taste of Memory* she has an interesting discussion of Jessie Conrad's *A Handbook of Cookery for a Small House* (1923), which has a preface by her husband,

Joseph Conrad, and which Halligan found in the National Library in Canberra. With only one servant Jessie Conrad “explains to us how it should not be necessary for a wife to spend more than one and a half to two hours preparing lunch, and another two and a half to three hours on dinner, and still eat well” (47).

The presentation of food in cookbooks has advanced from basic national foods to elaborate illustrations, and at times ingredients not easily available. A more recent trend is using cookbooks to depict national romantic elements of a country. One example is from Norway where Arne Brimi and Ardis Kaspersen’s book, *Norway’s National Dishes: A Food Lover’s Journey in Our Own Country* has gone through twelve reprints since it first came out in 2006. Although some critics describe the book as a collection of ordinary, everyday recipes, the aim appears to be to underline the national romantic element by illustrations of food against a background of fjords and mountains. The division of the book into regions with a brief description of characteristic features, culinary and otherwise, of the area emphasizes the cultural aspect of food and adds an exotic element. Marion Halligan would approve of this combination of food and travel. Such cookery books provide literally food for thought. Cookbooks also reflect cultural trends in cooking, for example, preserving fruit and vegetables in the 1930s and 40s, freezer cooking in the 1960s and 70s. The wealth of cookery books available today also indicates our transport to a multicultural world. Why do we buy cookery books, as food for thought, or an escape to another world, another ego?

The naming of food

To Halligan “eating is a mental as well as a physical pleasure. I can feast on the history and derivations of words as well as the things they name” (*EMW* 113). As an author she feels that words:

tell me what I want to say (...) So I’m quite prepared to believe that there’s something atavistic about naming, that the words we associate with things, their being and their doing, have an essential rightness that is not just wisdom after the event, not just hindsight (113).

As readers Halligan makes us aware of an aspect of food we seldom reflect over — the naming of food, indicating nationality, class and identity, and its processes, the con-text. The naming of food processes is illustrative of a cruel streak in mankind. Halligan quotes Jean Aron’s *The Art of Eating in France*: “‘Culinary terminology is a mirror in which one sees accents of cruelty, an extraordinary lust and joy of possession,’” (118) and continues:

Look at this list of verbs associated with the preparation of food: pound, beat, strip, whip, boil, sear, grind, tear, crack, mince, mash, crush, stuff, chop. Images of torture occur: *sauteur* is to make jump in the pan by applying heat, there is skinning and peeling and bleeding and hanging and binding, not to mention skewering and spitting, topping and tailing. Mediaeval cookbooks say ‘smite them in pieces’, ‘hew them in gobbets’. (*EMW* 118)

From Mrs. Beeton we can add words used in recipes; blanch, devil, dice, glaze for beautification, grate, knead, scald, rub in, steep, flatten, bind. So "[w]ith the best will in the world the food preparer can't avoid dealing in all those verbs of lust and anger and cruelty" (*EMW* 124). We can ask whether there is a connection to the pleasure aspect of food, all the violent methods being conducive to relieving tension and aggression.

But not only the processes of making food are the object of her criticism. How do we name the food we eat and the menus we make? Halligan cites Jean Anthelme Brillat Savarin who in 1825 said: "Tell me what man eats and I will tell you what he is" (*EMW* 94). This is equally applicable today. We change ordinary everyday food into something more exotic merely by changing its name, sometimes simply transferring the name from the food to the dish in which it is cooked, as when stews become casseroles (*EMW* 12). Often the change from English to French in the naming of dishes, for example clear soup becoming consommé, automatically makes it more upmarket. She thus plays on the idea of the unknown, the superiority of French or other cuisine — linguistic illiteracy, and the notion that the foreign sounding is inevitably superior. Halligan underscores the falsity of this view by commenting on how in fact the aristocracy refined the food and staple diet of the peasants. "French haute cuisine is really the working of the pig image on a grand scale. It's like a noble pyramid, with a broad base of peasant eating habits supporting a pinnacle that is ever more delicate and refined" (*EMW* 147). She satirizes this by pointing out the English adoption of the term gourmet, which in reality meant a wine taster's assistant, and the play on that word and gourmand (*EMW* 126). Another more mundane example could be the use of the word 'ambrosia', the food of the gods, to denote a currant bun in some parts of southern Norway, whereas elsewhere it is called a currant bun, an Easter bun, but a fact that is also illustrative of the naming of food, since different foods often have a variety of local names.

In conclusion, to Halligan food is an indispensable aspect of her writing, as its many literary references show. "The kind of novels I write need food" and "it is a good way of expressing human relations" for better or for worse (*ToM* 93). Just as T.S. Eliot's Alfred J. Prufrock "measure[s] out [his] life with coffee spoons" (1957, 12) so Halligan may be said in her non-fiction to measure out her life with meals, but there is never a question of "Do I to eat a peach?" (15) or anything else!

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Anne Holden Rønning is associate professor emerita at the University of Bergen, Norway. Her research interests and fields of publication are Women's Studies, and postcolonial literatures and cultures, especially from Australia and New Zealand. She is author of *Hidden and Visible Suffrage: Emancipation and the Edwardian Woman in Galsworthy, Wells and Forster* (1995), and has co-edited several books including *Identities and Masks: Colonial and Postcolonial Studies* (2001: Jakob Lothe and Peter Young) and *Readings of the Particular: The Postcolonial in the Postnational* (2007: with Lene Johannessen). Her latest book "*For Was I not Born Here?*" *Identity and Culture in the work of Yvonne du Fresne* came out in 2010.