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Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers, *Writing Food History: A Global Perspective* edited by Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers (New York: Berg Publishers, 2012), 296 p.

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Compte-rendu de lecture

***Writing Food History: A Global Perspective* edited by Kyri W. Claflin and Peter Scholliers (New York: Berg Publishers, 2012), 296 p.**

The editors of *Writing History: A Global Perspective* had two goals in mind with the conceptualization and formulation of this collection of twelve essays. The first was to “take stock of the writing of food history past and present.” It is now somewhat of an understatement to say that over the last three decades, Food Studies has exploded as an academic discipline and as a subject of popular interest. Thus, each author has sifted and sorted through a tremendous number of publications and the result is an impressive collection documenting the history of food history. The second goal was to extend the analysis of food history beyond Europe and the United States, two regions where food history has been especially prolific. In the introduction, the editors admit that calling this collection “global” is a large claim, “(s)till, our aim is to bring together a selection of historiographical essays that address a wider range of times and places than has been gathered together in one secondary source.” Presumably, this is a book for students of the field as well as more experienced food historians; both parties would be interested in understanding the intellectual growth of food history as well as anticipating what still needs to be accomplished in the various regional fields of study.

In putting together a coherent collection, the editors faced daunting challenges. First, in attempting to achieve global coverage in any meaningful sense, they needed to factor in the diverse practices for food history in different parts of the world. Thus, there is bound to be a disparity between the sizeable historiography for the United States and Western Europe and other regions of the world, where the body of published work is not as large and wide-ranging. As one might expect, the collection is uneven in the sense that some of the authors opted for depth of analysis over a more general summary of what has been published. The essays dedicated to American or European history serve more as reference works or summaries of extensive historiographies.

Second, food history is part of the larger interdisciplinary endeavor of Food Studies. Food Studies, like several other disciplines (Women’s Studies and Animal Studies come to mind), consists of work by academic and non-academic writers who display a range of impulses and interests in the field. Because of publishing interest in Food Studies titles, there are opportunities for non-academic authors to be published alongside academic ones. In the field of food history, for example, journalists and food activists have published some of the most popular and influential titles, although

these works may lack detailed references, a discernible methodology, or a discussion of theoretical influence. Moreover, there are dozens of historical recipe collections published each year (the latest trend in publication appears to be books with titles promising “a history of X in ten recipes”). As with Food Studies, there is a tremendous range in the quality of material as well as stylistic differences in the field of food history. Fortunately, the chapters focus on academic, not popular, works and each has a similar organization: after examining the major intellectual influences on a subject field, the chapter traces the history of writing about food, describing the major works and suggesting future directions for academic study.

The book is divided into four parts, with each part covering a specific region of the world. Part I consists of six essays on “The West,” Part II contains three essays on “The Middle East,” Part III has two essays on “South and East Asia” and Part IV completes the study with one essay on “Africa.” The regional sections reinforce the idea that food history is more popularly a Western topic of inquiry, as the section on “The West” is the largest. More problematic is the fact that these regional groupings serve to Balkanize the essays in the collection. This is unfortunate because there are valuable methodological and evidentiary connections to be made between the essays. For example, grouping the Atlantic World food histories (Latin America, Africa and North America) could yield much in terms of understanding how foods and food habits move across time *and* locale. Instead, this rather rigid system of organizing the essays makes for confusing reading. Jeff Pilcher’s thoroughly engaging essay on Iberian food history is placed in the section titled “The West” but Latin America is treated as a non-Western region in the book’s conclusion. Jonathan Brumberg-Krause’s essay on Jewish food history is placed in the section on “The Middle East,” though much of the essay deals with Jewish foodways in the United States and Europe.

Although students new to food history will benefit from understanding the foundations and growth of food history in Europe and the United States, well-versed readers will be familiar with the works cited and described. Each author of a European history essay opts for a thematic approach to organization and within each section there is a listing of important works in the field. However, given that European food history has been flourishing for decades, there should be more space devoted not only to debates within a particular historiography, but also to the question of whether food history has influenced other types of history or the general nature of historical inquiry. Amy Bentley’s incisive essay puts U.S. food historians in dialogue with other historians, especially with regard to women’s history, yet this is the most extensive effort to measure the intellectual impact of food history outside of the realm of Food Studies.

The section on the Middle East generates the most intellectual excitement, in particular the essay on Ottoman-Turkish historiography by Özge Samancı and Naswal Nasrallah’s assessment of Arab food history. This is likely the case because the historiographies in both regions are at critical stages of development. Historians of Ottoman-Turkish food habits are just

beginning to examine different types of primary sources while food historians for Arab cuisine have moved into the mainstream of historical inquiry, embracing a variety of sources and methodologies. The two contributions constitute lively and engaging statements on the field.

The section on “South and East Asia” is perhaps the strongest, despite the fact that the section is comprised of only two essays. Krishnendu Ray’s chapter on Indian food history offers a sophisticated discussion of the anthropological and sociological influences on Indian food history as well as imaginative insights into future directions for the discipline. Ray’s chapter also describes the very latest published works which have made significant impact in conceptualizing Indian food history. Katarzyna Cwiertka and Yujen Chen’s collaboration on the food history of East Asia covers an astonishing range of historiographical territory with precision and depth. Lastly, as the only essay from the section on Africa, James McCann’s chapter on African food history adopts a slightly different tone, focusing on recipes and cooking practices as types of historical knowledge. This approach enables McCann to achieve the difficult task of summarizing the past, present and future state of African food history with particular attention paid to women’s contributions and the discovery of African cooking through an interest in African-American cultural history.

The twelve essays are supplemented by brief introductory and concluding essays. Clearly, the editors hope that the essays can stand on their own as a collection, but readers might wish for more direction in order to make sense of such a vast body of material. The concluding essay is particularly bizarre in that it divides all the essays into “Western” and “Non-Western” in orientation then proceeds to tally the references made to the most influential authors (Fernand Braudel, Sidney Mintz and Alfred Crosby) in food historiography. But whose historiography is this? The editors themselves ask “(d)o non-Western researchers influence European and North American authors?” noting however that “(t)his influence does not appear in the chapters on European and North American food history writing.” (p. 212). The fact that the western researchers did not acknowledge non-Western influence in their essays is a strange omission. Even a cursory look through the most recent contributions to food history, for any region, indicates that today’s authors draw their inspiration from a number of individuals who come from all over the globe and study diverse geographical regions. That these questions have to be asked in the conclusion is indicative of the narrow scope of the collection, despite its claim to bring a global perspective to the study of food history. More accurately, perhaps, the present state and future of food history, to borrow a term used by author Jeffrey Pilcher, can be described in culinary terms as “fusion.”

Despite these shortcomings, the book is a useful collection of essays that document the history of writing food history. Each of the essays clearly describes the intellectual debts of food historians and conveys the interdisciplinary nature of early food histories. Newcomers to food history or students who read this book may be encouraged to tackle Fernand Braudel’s

The Structures of Everyday Life or Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power*, magisterial works that inspired generations of historians to find the global dimensions of the merely mundane. An extensive bibliography follows the collection and includes the works cited in each essay plus additional sources.

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