

# The King's Christmas pudding: globalization, recipes, and the commodities of empire\*

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## **Abstract**

*Food globalization has been in train for some ten millennia,<sup>1</sup> driven by, and driving, war, trade, imperialism, colonialism, and culture. Within economic history, the dominant discipline in the study of globalization, only the first four are dealt with in any depth, invariably focusing on production and the supply side. By contrast, there have been relatively few studies of globalization in terms of culture, consumption, and the demand side, resulting in an incomplete understanding of the ways in which material life, cultural values, and political imperatives interact in a global context. These dynamics are examined in this anthropological account of culture and commerce in Britain and the empire in the interwar years, focusing on a dish that assumed tremendous symbolic and economic importance – the King's Christmas pudding*

## **Introduction**

On Christmas Day 1927, King George V and the British royal family sat down at Sandringham to a festive dinner, which finished with a special Christmas pudding made by the royal chef, André Cédard.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Lord Meath of the Royal Colonial Institute, the pudding was 'a symbol of the unity of Empire, and an example to be copied in every household throughout the length and breadth of the British Empire',<sup>3</sup> as a spur to empire trade and identity. All of its ingredients had come from empire countries and the recipe had been distributed by the Empire Marketing Board to members of the public at home and overseas, so that they could join the king in this exercise in culinary patriotism.

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1 Kenneth F. Kiple, *A moveable feast*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

2 The formal cuisine of the English royal court had been French since the Norman Conquest, and the royal kitchens were headed by a French chef.

3 *The Times*, 2 December 1927, p. 11, col. C.

The King's Christmas pudding was duly eaten in Britain and around the world on that day, in a unique act of global mass consumption that was a cultural response to historically specific socioeconomic conditions.

'Symbol' is used here to mean something that embodies or represents significant beliefs and values, and that, on a social level, creates and communicates meanings, signifies identity, inspires sentiment, and mobilizes action. Symbols take on a new importance during periods of uncertainty and transition, when they play a key role in the processes of continuity and change. Historians use the terms 're-invented' or 're-imagined' tradition<sup>4</sup> in a similar way. Hobsbawm's classic study of symbolic practices in Europe between 1870 and the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 concludes by asking to what degree the success of invented traditions can be ascribed to deliberate manipulation on the one hand, and to pre-existing needs and feelings – not necessarily conscious – of particular bodies of people on the other.<sup>5</sup> To this question, the King's Christmas pudding provides one answer.

The interwar years are now considered a key period in modern history, the cusp between the first era of modern globalization (1870–1913) and the global economy that developed after the Second World War. During these years, and despite the fact that Britain had contributed substantially to globalization during the imperial heyday, there was a concerted, though contested, movement at home and abroad to resist internationalism and to preserve the unity and identity of the empire in the face of change. Food was a major focus of attention because more than half of the nation's food was imported by the early twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Only part of this came from the empire countries that were the primary market for British exports. Under free trade, Britain bought food and industrial raw materials globally without restrictions, raising concerns in some quarters about the nation's dependence on non-empire or affiliated producers. During the First World War, Britain suffered food shortages and struggled to maintain industrial support for the military, while troops from across the empire made a substantial contribution to the war effort. The country emerged from the conflict with a substantial trade deficit, heavy war debts, and continuing food shortages, soon exacerbated by unemployment, currency crises, and rising social unrest at home, along with worldwide economic depression. In this climate, it seemed to many at home and abroad that the fortunes of the nation and the empire could be restored, and future security ensured, if the unity forged under fire could be turned to commercial ends and the empire made self sufficient through inter-empire trade. Advocates favoured protective tariffs, but there was still considerable support for free trade. It was in this contested arena that the King's Christmas pudding emerged as a re-imagined symbol.

4 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: inventing tradition', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 1–14; David Cannadine, 'The last Hanoverian sovereign: the Victorian monarchy in historical perspective, 1688–1988', in A. L. Beier, David Cannadine, and James M. Rosenheim, eds., *The first modern society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 127–65.

5 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-producing traditions: Europe, 1870–1914', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The invention of tradition*, p. 263.

6 Avner Offer, *The First World War: an agrarian interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 82.

Anthropologists<sup>7</sup> have long recognized that food is not just feed.<sup>8</sup> Once past the point of basic food security, to the people who consume it, food is never perceived as a value-free and symbolically neutral source of nutrition, which has come haphazardly into being. It is an anthropological commonplace that particular foods, meals, or cuisines are emblematic of nations, ethnicities, regions, and communities.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, 'cultural biographies'<sup>10</sup> are constructed to show how certain foods acquire particular meanings and associations, how these change over time, and how they may be mobilized for social, economic, or political ends. As Catherine Palmer observed, it is through food rather than political rhetoric that most people experience the nation in everyday life.<sup>11</sup> Emblematic foods may be associated with specific events in the nation's history, but they are not merely commemorative. In some profound way connected with the efficacy of symbols, the consumption of emblematic foods is experienced as an act of communion that puts the eater in direct touch with the values, achievements, and heritage of an idealized past.

The following sections present a cultural biography of the Christmas pudding and an account of the ways in which it was re-imagined in the service of nation and empire. Sources used include the archives of food retailers and wholesalers, as well as culinary literature in the form of cookbooks, booklets, advertisements, and recipes, which are now recognized as important social texts and historical records.<sup>12</sup> They are also, as Arjun Appadurai, Carol Helstosky, and others have shown, highly effective instruments in the creation and consolidation of national identity.<sup>13</sup> While critics have argued that prescriptive literature such as cookbooks and advertisements does not describe what people actually did, many anthropologists and historians of food take the view that 'normative discourse itself is highly complex and a valid site for historical investigation',<sup>14</sup> which is the position taken here. Although the tone of these sources is generalizing and without the benefit of historical hindsight – as Offer

7 Mary Douglas, 'Standard social uses of food: introduction', in Mary Douglas, ed., *Food in the social order* (vol. 9 of *Mary Douglas: collected works*), London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 1–39; Raymond Firth, *The work of the gods in Tikopia*, London: London School of Economics, 1940; Jack Goody, *Cooking, cuisine and class: a study in comparative sociology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982; idem, *Food and love: a cultural history of East and West*, London: Verso, 1998; Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and practical reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.

8 Mary Douglas, 'Introduction', in Jessica Kuper, ed., *The anthropologist's cookbook: second edition*, London: Kegan Paul, 1997.

9 Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, 'The anthropology of food and eating', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, 2002, pp. 99–119.

10 Igor Kopytoff, 'The cultural biography of things', in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The social life of things*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp. 64–91.

11 Catherine Palmer, 'From theory to practice: experiencing the nation in everyday life', *Journal of Material Culture*, 3, 2, 1998, pp. 175–99; Kaori O'Connor, *The English breakfast: the biography of a national meal*, London: Kegan Paul, 2006.

12 Jessamyn Neuhaus, 'The way to a man's heart: gender role, domestic ideology and cookbooks in the 1950s', *Journal of Social History*, 32, 3, 1999, pp. 529–55; Nicola Humble, *Culinary pleasures: cookbooks and the transformation of British food*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005; John C. Super, 'Food and history', *Journal of Social History*, 36, 1, 2002, pp. 165–78.

13 Arjun Appadurai, 'How to make a national cuisine', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30, 1, 1988, pp. 3–24; Carol Helstosky, 'Recipe for the nation: reading Italian history through *La scienza in cucina* and *La cucina futurista*', *Food and Foodways*, 11, 2–3, 2003, pp. 113–40.

14 Neuhaus, 'The way to a man's heart', p. 530. See also Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox, 'American adaptation and Mrs Charles Dickens's plum pudding', *Journal of American Culture*, 28, 40, 2005, pp. 431–6.

notes, the 'building,' 'Juglar', and 'business' cycles of late Victorian Britain were perceived by contemporaries simply as the alternation of 'good and bad trade'<sup>15</sup> – they are representative of everyday life, in which diplomacy, party politics, free trade, and tariffs boil down to the question 'what shall we eat today?'

## A brief biography of the Christmas pudding

The Christmas pudding is a gastronomic paradox: the most English of dishes made from the most un-English of ingredients. The main ingredients are spices, dried vine fruits, and sugar, all imported. Combined with fat, eggs, and flour or breadcrumbs, the mixture was enclosed in a bladder or cloth and boiled or steamed for several hours, a cookery technique that was practised across Europe from ancient times, gradually falling out of favour except in England. There it gave rise to both sweet and savoury puddings, such as jam roly-poly, Spotted Dick, and steak-and-kidney, which are uniquely English. In the early medieval period, spices, sugar, and dried vine fruits were restricted to the elite, but spiced cakes, pies, and puddings were distributed to retainers, supporters, tenants, relations, friends, and the deserving poor in the Christmas acts of hierarchical hospitality, charity, and gifting, which signified social and political status, affiliations, and obligations.<sup>16</sup> These distributions began at the top of the social hierarchy, with lavish distributions from the royal kitchens initiating the flow of gifts. The precise period in which the spiced steamed pudding came into being is debated.<sup>17</sup> However, because British involvement in the spice trade in the late Tudor period made spices, dried vine fruits, and sugar more widely available, the pudding became associated in the popular imagination with feasts at the royal courts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and with a golden age of exploration, merchant adventuring, and English expansion overseas.

The medieval Christmas was the high point of the sacred and secular year, retaining many of the associations of pre-Christian midwinter festivals, onto which it had been grafted. A transition between the old year and the new, it took place in a period of sacred time, when normal activities were suspended. They were replaced by rituals and practices that aimed to consolidate community, and emphasized continuity by commemorating the past while looking ahead to the future. So far as means allowed, feasting, gifting, and display were central to the festivities. The 'proper' observation of the festival was considered essential for securing success in the coming year, and this included the creation and consumption of foods that had become emblematic of the holiday, often cakes. The ingredients originally had special significance – usually associated with luck and fertility – and very often there was an order in which they had to be added, and a special way in which they had to be mixed. In the case of the Christmas pudding, these survive into the present in the practice of putting lucky charms such as silver coins into the pudding to bring luck in the coming year, and in the tradition of 'Stir Up Sunday', which falls about a month before

15 Offer, *The First World War*, p. 121.

16 Felicity Heal, 'Food gifts, the household and the politics of exchange in early modern Europe', *Past and Present*, 199, 1, 2005, pp. 41–70.

17 Paul Levy, *The feast of Christmas*, London: Kyle Cathie, 1993.

Christmas and is the traditional day for making the Christmas pudding.<sup>18</sup> Before it is cooked, all members of the household are supposed to have a stir of the pudding, always in a right or clockwise direction, to ensure unity and harmony in the coming year.

Christmas was also a time for personal and fiscal accounting. Vows were taken, social relationships renewed, and debts paid, for household and trade accounts were reckoned 'from Christmas to Christmas'. The close association between the holiday and the family can be traced to the formal establishment of Christmas in the fourth century CE, which led, as Daniel Miller has noted, to the idealization of the nuclear family that has been central to western European social values ever since.<sup>19</sup> Thus, from early times, Christmas has been the nexus of powerful sentiments and imperatives linking consumption, family, cosmology, morality, and food on a profound level.

After the break from Rome and the establishment of the Church of England under Henry VIII, Christmas began to take on an increasingly national, 'English' character. By the time Christmas was banished in England in 1647, under the Commonwealth, the pudding had emerged as a dish particularly associated with the holiday and, as such, won the particular disapproval of the Puritans. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the pudding returned to the festive table, but Christmas entertainments at the royal court did not recover their former splendour.<sup>20</sup> The secular celebration of Christmas gradually fell into abeyance during the period that followed, until it was recovered and transformed in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign, a development in which Charles Dickens was instrumental.

Dickens did not consciously re-invent Christmas, but he re-imagined it, catching the mood of the early Victorian era, when the nation was seeking the lost ideals of its past in order to unite a society undergoing potentially divisive change and to inspire a new golden age of imperial expansion. The redemption of Scrooge, who believes that 'anyone who goes about with "Merry Christmas" on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through his heart', is a timeless parable, but the politics and economics of the Hungry Forties are at the heart of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), expressed in moral terms.<sup>21</sup> Scrooge is very much a product of the new Victorian age. As a man of business with a warehouse in the City of London, his wealth would unavoidably have been connected to some aspect of empire trade, and his conversion to Christmas justifies the profits of empire when they are used to improve the lot of all. The de-sacralized spirituality of the tale perfectly conveys the increasing secularization of Christmas.

The *Carol*, with its set piece of the blazing pudding brought proudly to the table by Mrs Crachit, is taken as the defining work of the Victorian Christmas, but there are other key writings, a number of them appearing in *Household Words*. Launched in 1850, *Household Words* was a two-penny weekly journal of entertainment and information. It

18 The name originates from the special prayer (or collect) for the last Sunday before Advent, which begins 'Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people'.

19 Daniel Miller, 'A theory of Christmas', in Daniel Miller, ed., *Unwrapping Christmas*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, pp. 3–37.

20 William Francis Dawson, *Christmas and its associations*, London: Elliot Stock, 1902.

21 Fred Guida, *A Christmas Carol and its adaptations: Dickens's story on screen and television*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc, 2000, p. 12. See also Paul Davis, *The life and times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

was conceived, commissioned, and compiled by Charles Dickens, as part of his commitment to what he called 'that popular literature which elevates a people'.<sup>22</sup> Rapidly establishing itself as one of the most widely read periodicals of the day, *Household Words* provided a stimulus for popular discussion and became a medium for the consolidation and communication of popular culture, practices, understandings, and values, in a way that specialized and upper-class journals did not.<sup>23</sup> The Christmas issues of *Household Words* are of particular interest, for they show the Dickensian English Christmas in the process of construction and also demonstrate the extent to which Christmas, the Christmas pudding, nationalism, commerce, and empire were already, by 1850, conflated in the common culture.

The first Christmas issue included a culinary allegory of empire by Charles Knight, Dickens' friend and fellow author and publisher, entitled 'A Christmas pudding'.<sup>24</sup> In this tale, after romping with his children on Christmas eve, Mr Oldknow descends to the kitchen to see if the pudding is in hand, concerned to ensure that there will be enough to share with friends and family. He is reassured by his wife, who reads him her old family recipe:

One pound raisins; one pound currants; one pound suet; one pound breadcrumbs; quarter pound orange peel; one nutmeg; one teaspoonful powdered cinnamon; one wineglassful brandy; seven eggs; one teaspoonful salt; quarter pound raw sugar; milk enough to liquefy the mass, if the eggs and brandy be not sufficient for this purpose.

Mr Oldknow then settles in a chair and drifts into a reverie, in which he is visited by a procession of *genii* or spirits of the pudding ingredients, each of whom engages him in a polemical debate on aspects of empire trade. The first, the Genius of the Raisin, hailing from Moorish Iberia, asks him why English ships carry away the richest fruits of the sunny south, to which Oldknow replies:

We come to your ports with the products of our looms and our furnaces, and we induce a taste for comforts that will become a habit. When our glass and our porcelain shall find its way into your peasant's hut, then will your olives be better tended and your grapes more carefully dried. Man only worthily labours when he labours for exchange with other labour. Behold that pudding! – It is our England's annual luxury. It is the emblem of our commercial eminence. The artisans of Birmingham and Manchester – the seamen of London and Liverpool – whose festive board will be made joyous, tomorrow, with that national dish, has contributed by his labour, to make the raisins of Malaga and the currants of Zante – the oranges of Algarve, the cinnamon of Ceylon and the nutmegs of the Moluccas – of commercial value; and he has thus called them into existence as effectually as the labour of the native cultivator.

The Genius of the Currant, from the Levant, where wheat-growing land was given over to vine production for the English market, wins Oldknow's approval by avowing 'It is better to grow currants in the soil which they delight in, and buy our wheat . . . We are sure of our

22 Anne Lohrli, *Household Words: a weekly journal 1850–1859*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973, p. 333.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

24 Charles Knight, 'A Christmas pudding', in Charles Dickens, ed., *Household Words*, 39, Christmas Number, 21 December 1850, pp. 300–4.

bread for our currants, whilst England demands plum puddings'. Less welcome was the Genius of Bread, an English farmer from Kent, slow of speech and clad in worker's smock and straw hat. 'Protection!' cries Oldknow, 'who taught you that song? Do you want protection against cheap bread, my friend; against warm and cheap clothing ... against your tea, your sugar, your butter, your cheese, your bacon and your Christmas pudding?' The Spirit of Suet, dressed as a Smithfield meat-market porter, moves Oldknow to uneasy thoughts of animal welfare. The Genius of the Nutmeg admits that, although the Dutch had limited the trade in cloves, nutmegs, and cinnamon in order to drive up prices when they held the spice monopoly, they realized that this was injurious to them and their territories overseas, and now followed the English approach of filling the market with spice commodities, thus lowering prices for all and benefiting the colonies. The Genius of Sugar, a freed slave still working on a West Indian sugar plantation, demonstrated that slavery was not a necessary precondition of productivity. While acknowledging that moral issues relating to the plantation labourer's 'freedom' remain unresolved, Oldknow rejoices that the great body of the British people could now buy their sugar at half the price their fathers paid.

Then the Egg Collector from Cork appears, whose eggs will bind the Christmas pudding and who has benefited from the relaxation of tax on trade within the British Isles, and the Spirit of Salt, who pleads for salt to be made tax-free in India, as it now is in England. Inspired, Oldknow cries, 'We, in our united interests, bound together, produce Christmas pudding!' and a great pudding appears, crowned with holly and wreathed in blue flame, around which the spirits of the pudding dance before vanishing, when Oldknow awakes with a start.

Here, before empire trade reached its zenith, are practices and concerns familiar today: the commercial transformation of landscapes, dependence rather than self-sufficiency, cheapness at a price, the rights of animals and of labourers, the effects of monopoly, the contest between protectionism and free trade, and the rivalry between home, colonial, and foreign producers. All are implicit in the symbol of the Christmas pudding. At the same time, 'A Christmas pudding' affirmed the benefits of empire and free trade, and the pudding itself became a popular symbol of the nation and its imperial wealth, appearing first in cartoons with John Bull, the national personification of England,<sup>25</sup> and later with Britannia as she came to signify empire.

Wherever they went in the world, Kenneth Inglis has noted, 'the English took their Christmas with them'.<sup>26</sup> English newspapers and journals of the Victorian and Edwardian periods abound with accounts of Christmas pudding consumed on the shores of Lake Rudolph, accompanied by champagne and the toast to 'absent friends and home'; of Christmas pudding carried on an expedition to New Guinea, where it was cooked by immersion in a spring of boiling mud; of Christmas dinner in the South African veldt, consisting of wildebeest steak and a pudding made of rice, ostrich egg, raisins, and currants; of Christmas in the Australian bush spent feasting on a roast haunch of kangaroo and a pudding made of soaked biscuit, sugar, and brandy; of resolutely eating in the Sinai desert a Christmas pudding that the native cook had mistakenly doused with methylated spirits instead of brandy; of struggling through the Burma hills on foot in full evening dress for the sake

25 Miles Taylor, 'John Bull and the iconography of public opinion in England c.1712–1929', *Past and Present*, 134, 1992, pp. 93–128.

26 Kenneth Stanley Inglis, *The Australian colonists: an exploration of social history, 1788–1870*, Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1974, p. 105.



of pudding and a Christmas game of snapdragon. A substantial part of the mail sent out to the colonies for Christmas consisted of Christmas puddings, firmly established as the symbol of both nation and empire. An editorial in the *London Daily News* proclaimed that 'The true bond of union among the British race is the festival of Christmas',<sup>27</sup> and, it might have added, the Christmas pudding.

## The Christmas pudding in the First World War and afterwards

As the promise of 'Over by Christmas' rang hollow, troops in the trenches struggled year after year to keep Christmas as best they could, a patriotic duty in which they were assisted by the pudding. Collections were made in London theatres and music halls on behalf of the fund for supplying Christmas pudding to the men at the front and in military hospitals; national newspapers and voluntary organizations also ran Christmas pudding funds. Even at the height of the War, it was possible to order Christmas hampers with a pudding to send to prisoners of war and to soldiers on the battlefields, and a favourite motif on the patriotic Christmas cards sent during the period was the flags of the allied nations stuck into a Christmas pudding. At home, as the supply of raisins in the country ran low, shortages in general increased, and food prices began to rise, recipes for puddings using substitute ingredients such as carrots appeared in the national press. One from 1915 ran as follows:

To make a 4 lb pudding: ½ lb suet or dripping; ½ lb flour, ½ lb breadcrumbs, ½ lb dates; 1 lb grated carrots, ½ lb currants, 4 oz mixed peel, grated rind of a lemon; 4 oz sugar, one egg and spice to taste.<sup>28</sup>

By the end of the War, everything but the carrots would be scarce or unobtainable.

The social and economic problems that overshadowed the post-war years enhanced the importance of Christmas. 'Christmas as usual' is a phrase that occurs again and again in the popular press. As always after a war or during unsettled times, there was a conscious harking back to an idealized golden age – Merrie England or Old England – an affirmation of tradition in the face of change and loss. For those who could afford them, fancy dress parties and pageants with medieval themes were all the rage. For others, newspapers, magazines, and memoirs of the period reveal Christmases in which luxury goods were scarce and economizing something of which no one was ashamed. Gifts were mainly for the children, and world-weary adults whose hearts were not in the festivities were urged to make an effort, in the spirit of Stephen Leacock's 1918 short story 'Merry Christmas': "The world that once you knew," said Father Time, "seems broken and destroyed about you. You must not let them know – the children . . . save and spare them all you can from the evil, hate and horror of the war . . . Give them back their Merry Christmas."<sup>29</sup>

27 'An Imperial Christmas', *Daily News* (London), 21 November 1890.

28 'Christmas pudding', *The Times*, 8 December 1915, p. 13, col. C.

29 Stephen Leacock, 'Merry Christmas', in *Frenzied Fiction*, London: John Lane, 1918, text available at <http://gaslight.mtroyal.ca/frenzyX18.htm> (consulted 2 December 2008), where the date is incorrectly given as 1919.



Food was at the centre of the celebrations, and the immense importance accorded to Christmas can be seen through the culinary literature of the interwar years. However, while these publications clearly invoke the 'olde time' aspects of Christmas, their readership was far from traditional. The social changes of the interwar period gave women in Britain, who now made the household decisions about food purchasing, preparation, and consumption, a new importance in the demand side of the global food trade. This was both direct, in terms of purchases, and indirect, in terms of influence on policy and preferences. In addition, the configurations of social class were changing, and social mobility, both downwards and upwards, increased the number of women personally involved in food practices. There has been a tendency to overlook this area of social engagement, possibly because (as Warren Belasco has suggested) studies of women preparing and consuming food in the home link food, in the view of some feminist historians, 'with patriarchal oppression and women's domestic "enslavement"'.<sup>30</sup> This is especially so for the interwar period, when the emphasis on home, family, and children – always strong after a war – long tended to be seen only as an unwelcome forced retreat into domesticity, with a consequent loss of female freedoms gained before and during the war. However, recent studies are contributing to a more balanced view, in which the interwar years are seen as a time when political, economic, and social change contributed to the emergence of a 'modern' femininity.<sup>31</sup> In this context, as the King's Christmas pudding will show, recipes could be a political instrument, and shopping an act of empowerment. Then as now, it is precisely because they were 'shoppers' and 'cooks' that women were important political, moral, and economic agents.

It was common practice in the 1920s for women to have one or just a few basic cookbooks, which they would supplement with free seasonal and topical recipes, often amassing large collections. Recipes were becoming a mainstay of the food trade in Britain, with firms originating and distributing recipes that promoted the use of their products. Cheaply and quickly produced for the emerging mass market, these recipe leaflets and booklets are more reflective of trends in popular culture than cookbooks. The fact that culinary ephemera such as recipe booklets have not survived as well as cookbooks and magazines is another factor that has obscured the food culture of the interwar years.

Among the many Christmas booklets of the interwar period, the *Atora book of olde time Christmas customs, games & recipes* reveals the idealized Christmas of the period, and the centrality of the Christmas pudding (see Figure 1). Ostensibly addressed to children, it begins 'We have published this Christmas Book for young people – we think it will interest grownups also – in the hope that it will help to keep alive the traditional spirit of Christmas, one of the priceless legacies of our past.' Hanging up the stockings, admiring the Christmas tree, and, for those who had them, gathering around to hear the modern magic of the wireless were simply the prologue for the really important event – what *Atora* calls 'the dinner of dinners on the day of days':

30 Warren Belasco, 'Introduction', in Warren Belasco and Phillip Scranton, eds., *Food nations: selling taste in consumer cultures*, New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 198. See also Mary A. Procida, 'No longer half-baked: food studies and women's history', *Journal of Women's History*, 16, 3, 2004, pp. 197–205.

31 Adrian Bingham, 'An era of domesticity? Histories of women and gender in interwar Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 1, 2004, pp. 225–33.

Figure 1. *Atora book of olde time Christmas customs, games & recipes*, Manchester: Hugon & Co. Ltd, c.1920s, cover. Author's collection, reproduced courtesy of Premier Foods.



No Christmas dinner, of course, is complete without the pudding. Turkeys and geese are bought, ready and fat, at the poulterer's. They have only to be cleaned, stuffed and roasted – but the Christmas pudding has to be MADE! It is mother's masterpiece. It is

made of the choicest ingredients in the world, and no one can make it like mother. That we all swear!<sup>32</sup>

A recipe for a Christmas pudding follows. As makers of suet, an essential pudding ingredient, it is not surprising that Atora would provide a recipe for the highlight of the feast. What is significant is that almost every producer of the interwar years brought out a recipe for Christmas pudding that incorporated its product or carried its name. This included the makers of Angostura bitters, usually used in cocktails, and the makers of gelatine, who offered recipes for jellied Christmas puddings.

Shops also gave out Christmas recipes as a stimulus to trade, among them the rising multiple grocer J. Sainsbury & Co. Christmas was the busiest time of Sainsbury's trading year, beginning in November with the arrival of the new season's dried fruits for puddings, cake, and mincemeat. Shortly thereafter, account customers and personal callers received copies of the new Sainsbury Christmas brochure, listing Christmas products and their prices along with the recipe for 'Sainsbury's Old Time Christmas Pudding' (Figure 2), of which the brochure noted, 'The recipe was obtained from an old time cookery book compiled in an age when Christmas was even a greater festival than it is today'.<sup>33</sup>

Sainsbury's recipe remained the same from year to year, but the text and seasonal illustrations changed. A brochure from the early 1920s carried pictures of a family party heading for home, laden with gifts, some still in military service uniforms awaiting demobilization, and another of party-goers in fancy dress. While respecting tradition in the case of the pudding recipe, Sainsbury's brochures were otherwise resolutely modern, eschewing medieval or Dickensian treatments for contemporary ones, reflecting the image of a progressive retailer in touch with the times. Another 1920s brochure showed packets of Sainsbury Christmas ingredients dancing around a pudding bowl, indicating that the firm had moved away from the old system of selling by weight from bulk and had adopted the new system of own-label pre-packaging. The text began 'Stir yourself – get Sainsbury's ingredients for this year's pudding', and continued 'Be proud to own you make your own'. The latter was an acknowledgement of the post-war decline in domestic service, which meant that an increasing number of middle-class women were having to cook for themselves for the first time. At the same time, many women whose circumstances had improved were enjoying the unfamiliar privilege of choice, and needed guidance.

What emerges clearly from the culinary literature is that the pudding defined Christmas, family, nation, and empire, accommodating tradition while adapting to change. Every brand and commodity wanted to be a part of it; every retailer promoted it; every person felt obliged to eat it, or at least to express an opinion about it, and this was the case across class lines. Indeed, a close reading of *A Christmas Carol* reveals that the pudding was the most important Christmas dish that Mrs Cratchit cooked at home. Having no oven, she had to send her goose to the local baker to be roasted. For the poor, Christmas assumed enormous importance. As George Orwell put it in a 'lost essay' that remained unpublished

32 *Atora book of olde time Christmas customs, games & recipes*, Manchester: Hugon & Co. Ltd, c.1920s, p. 13 (author's collection).

33 'The Xmas pudding that only Mother can make', from a selection of Christmas leaflets by J. Sainsbury & Co., Sainsbury Archive, Museum of London Docklands.

Figure 2. 'Sainsbury fruit for the Xmas pudding Mother can be proud of', SA-ADV-PRO-GEN-12C-2-2. Image courtesy of the Sainsbury Archive, Museum of London Docklands.

# SAINSBURY FRUIT

*for the  
Xmas pudding  
Mother can  
be proud of*



## The pick of the market

Each of the Sainsbury ingredients for the Xmas pudding is a delight to the discriminating housewife. Currants with soft delicate bloom, raisins and sultanas that really look as if they store the sunshine; their very appearance is a promise of the rich juicy tang you taste in Sainsbury Fruit. Almonds, plump and white . . . Candied peel so full of flavour . . . marvellous spices of absolute purity . . . all these good things, as everything else that bears the name of Sainsbury, are chosen from the best the world produces. And because Sainsbury's buy in such large quantities you pay less for the best at Sainsbury's. Use Sainsbury ingredients and you will have a Xmas pudding really worthy of "*the day that links time together.*"

**Packed under the most careful supervision to ensure absolute cleanliness**  
From the time they are chosen in far-off lands, fruits and spices for Sainsbury's receive special and constant attention. They are all packed ready for sale, thus ensuring absolute freedom from dirt and dust.

### PAY LESS FOR THE BEST AT SAINSBURYS

<p><b>RAISINS.</b> Choicest Valencia . . . per lb. 9d. Fine Quality . . . . . " " 7d.</p> <p><b>CURRENTS.</b> Choicest Vostizza . . . . . " 8d. Fine Quality . . . . . " 6d.</p> <p><b>ALMONDS.</b> Ground, Sweet . . . . . 1-lb. tins 7 1/2d. Best Cooking . . . . . " 1-lb. " 1 1/2d. " . . . . . " 1-lb. " 7d. " . . . . . " 1-lb. " 1 1/2d.</p> <p><b>ESSENCES.</b> Almonds . . . . . 1 oz. bottle 9 1/2d.</p>	<p><b>SULTANAS.</b> Choicest . . . . . per lb. 9d. Fine Quality . . . . . " " 8d.</p> <p><b>CANDIED PEEL.</b> Mixed Peel . . . . . 1-lb. 2 1/2d. " . . . . . " 1-lb. 5d.</p> <p><b>SPICES.</b> Nutmegs . . . . . 2 oz. tins 4 1/2d. Ground Mixed Spice . . . . . " " 3d. SUET (Shredded). Sainsbury's . . . . . 1-lb. packets 5 1/2d. 1 lb. " 1 1/2d.</p> <p><b>SUGAR.</b> Finest Quality British Refined per lb. 3d.</p>
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Your Puddings are certain to be a great success if they are made with the "SAINSBURY" FRUIT.

### SAINSBURY'S SPECIAL RECIPE XMAS PUDDING

<p>1-lb. Suet 1-lb. Mixed Peel 2-oz. Sweet Almonds 1-oz. Bitter Almonds 1-lb. Currants 1-lb. Raisins 1-lb. Sultanas</p>	<p>1-lb. Sugar 3-ozs. Bread Crumbs 1-ozs. Flour 1/2 Nutmeg 1 Apple 1 Dessert Spoonful Mace. A little Salt</p>	<p>Rind of 1 Lemon and Juice 3 Eggs 4 drops Essence Almonds 2 Table Spoonfuls Brandy or Whiskey 5 hours to boil—and two when wanted for table.</p> <p><b>SUFFICIENT FOR TWO PUDDINGS</b></p>
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## RELY ON SAINSBURY'S — THE NAME THAT BUILT ITS FAME ON QUALITY & DEPENDABILITY



until after his death: 'They are in high spirits because for once in a way they have enough to eat. The wolf is at the door, but he is wagging his tail. The steam of the Christmas pudding drifts across a background of pawnshops and sweated labour, and in a double sense the ghost of Scrooge stands beside the dinner table.'<sup>34</sup>

The Victorian Christmas clubs, into which less well-off families paid over the year to ensure that they would have a goose or turkey and the ingredients for a pudding at Christmas, flourished in the interwar years, as economic conditions worsened. As soon as the holiday was over, signs went up saying 'Join our Christmas Club and provide for a Happy Christmas' and 'Join our Christmas Club. Pay what you like. Have what you please.'<sup>35</sup> In the face of continuing post-war food shortages, with fresh eggs and cream both expensive and difficult to obtain, Bird's offered a recipe for an egg-free Christmas pudding, and Libby's urged the use of their tinned evaporated milk in and over the pudding, in the absence of fresh cream. Despite everything, Christmas had to be kept and, above all, there had to be a Christmas pudding.

## Puddings and politics

Several post-war Christmases came and went with the increasingly acrimonious debate between free trade and protectionism unresolved. Discontent was mounting among producers in the empire, who had been promised trade support, contributing to calls for autonomy. Joseph Chamberlain's vision of a third stage of empire – a federated imperial fellowship, first proposed in 1897 – re-emerged. Similarly, the views of Lord Meath, founder of the Empire Day Movement, who had advocated a formal re-imagining of empire in terms of peaceable community, commerce, civilization, and citizenship since the 1890s, received popular support in many quarters. The Empire Day Movement benefited from the dominions and colonies that supported it overseas, and from the involvement of a number of women's voluntary organizations, among them the British Women's Patriotic League and the Conservative Women's Unionist Organisation, who had been active during the War. After 1918, these groups dedicated themselves to peacetime projects intended to improve the lot of the nation and empire.<sup>36</sup> Principal among them was the promotion of empire produce as part of caring for and supporting the family of empire.

The British Women's Patriotic League held the first Empire Shopping Week in London in 1922, mounting displays of empire food and goods, and persuading department stores such as Harrods and Selfridges to do the same. By 1923, the idea had been taken up elsewhere in Britain and in a number of colonial cities, while, at home, women's organizations carried on an incessant campaign to make local British shops stock empire goods.

34 George Orwell (originally written in 1943 under the pseudonym 'John Freeman'), 'Can socialists be happy?', text available at <http://www.readprint.com/work-1257/George-Orwell> (consulted 2 December 2008).

35 Showcards sold by Brunton and Williams, 14 Paternoster Square, London, EC4 (author's collection).

36 Frank Trentmann, 'Before "fair trade": empire, free trade, and the moral economies of food in the modern world', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 25, 6, 2007, pp. 1079–1102. See also Paul Ward, "'Women of Britain say go": women's patriotism in the First World War', *Twentieth Century British History*, 12, 1, 2001, pp. 23–45.

In the words of Sir Henry Cowan, whose wife was the head of the British Women's Patriotic League:

The Empire Week movement was a woman's movement, for women were the principal shoppers and they could create a demand for Empire goods by seeing that those they dealt with kept them. Imperial preference was of two kinds: there was the preference of tariffs, which was a political matter . . . and there was the preference of sentiment which we could extend to the Dominions in spite of any Government. Even if at a slightly higher price, they should encourage Empire goods.<sup>37</sup>

The League also distributed recipes using empire products, prepared sample boxes to introduce shoppers to empire products, and, in 1924, the year of the British Empire Exhibition in London, launched a special appeal to 'Make your Christmas pudding this year an Empire pudding', issuing a leaflet with a recipe for a Christmas pudding made entirely of ingredients that came from within the empire. A pre-packed box containing all the ingredients for the empire pudding was offered at a cost of 4s 6d, carriage free; a ready-made empire pudding in a basin could also be ordered.<sup>38</sup> The women were not alone in their efforts: the larger dominions and larger empire producers mounted promotions and displays of their goods, and colonial supporters in government, the ministries and business did all they could, while Lord Clarendon called for a whole-hearted effort on the part of the grocery trade to bring empire foodstuffs to the attention of the public.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, despite all efforts, shoppers complained that empire goods were not widely available, while retailers blamed customers for failing to buy empire goods when offered, and also blamed wholesalers for refusing to sell empire goods in small enough quantities to make it worthwhile for independent grocers to stock them. Meanwhile, non-empire goods were continuing to flow into Britain, increasingly as branded goods rather than just as bulk commodities.

Dried vine fruits such as raisins and sultanas, most of which still came from non-empire countries, were a case in point. By the early twentieth century, Australia was the largest dried vine-fruit producer within the empire. Initially, Australian producers profited from the Balkan Wars, which disrupted production in the Levant, the long-established source of Britain's dried-fruit imports, only to encounter formidable competition from America. Ironically, by the 1920s, the American dried-fruit industry, centred in California, was largely in the hands of Armenian emigrants from the Levant, who were expert in the cultivation of vine fruits and figs.<sup>40</sup> The California raisin producers were represented by a cooperative that became known as Sun Maid. Overproduction of grapes in America led Sun Maid to enter the British market in 1924, when they hired the American advertising agency J. Walter Thomson (JWT), recently established in Britain, to promote their product

37 'A women's movement', *The Times*, 20 May 1924, p. 16, col. E.

38 'Christmas food supplies', *The Times*, 14 December 1925, p. 11, col. E.

39 'Empire trade', *The Times*, 23 September 1925, p. 5, col. A.

40 Berge Bulbulian, *The Fresno Armenians: history of a diaspora community*, Sanger, CA: Quill Driver Books/Word Dancer Press Inc, 2001.

there,<sup>41</sup> in a direct challenge to Australian dried-fruit producers. Having discovered that British consumers purchased raisins mainly at Christmas, often as unbranded goods sold by weight out of bulk, JWT's Sun Maid campaign involved giving out booklets of recipes for dishes such as raisin bread that called for raisins all year round. Sun Maid also sold raisins in branded cartons, bearing the distinctive Sun Maid girl logo, ran promotions that linked Sun Maid raisins to health, hygiene, and vitality, and advertised to all social classes. In response, the Australians published their own booklet of raisin recipes for distribution in Britain. Outdoing the Americans in devising new ways to use raisins, their publication included a beauty recipe that called for washing one's face in water in which Australian raisins had been soaked overnight.<sup>42</sup> As Christmas 1925 drew near, and as Sun Maid continued its promotion of year-round raisin use, the Australian Dried Fruit Board countered with display advertisements in national newspapers, urging shoppers to 'Make your Christmas Pudding a British Empire Pudding', with Australian sultanas, currants, and raisins. That year, the theme of the Lord Mayor of London's Show was 'Imperial Trade', with the dominions and colonies providing carts decorated with their products for the Mayor's procession through the city. Australia's entry was a huge Christmas pudding on a wagon drawn by six white horses, each horse representing one of the states of Australia, and on the pudding was the slogan 'Make your pudding of Empire products'.<sup>43</sup> The transition of the pudding from latent symbol to instrument of social action had begun.

Promotion of their products by empire producers, and the support of empire goods by women's groups at home and abroad, were seen by *The Times* as highly useful 'practical propaganda'<sup>44</sup> but, in view of the continuing decline of the economy, there were increasing calls for concerted action on a national scale. Advocates argued that it was not enough for shopping weeks, however successful, to be held only in large cities, or even in provincial towns. The message needed to be carried into every home in the land and, above all, it needed the support of the government. Finally, in the early summer of 1926, a government decision was taken. There would be no formal tariffs to give preference to empire goods and commerce. Instead, trade would be on a voluntary basis, but government funds would be made available to promote empire goods and increase imperial productivity, these funds being administered by an organization created for the purpose, the Empire Marketing Board (EMB).

## The Empire Marketing Board's first Christmas

Headed by the Rt. Hon. Leo Amery, Secretary of State for the Colonies and the Dominions, and the civil servant Stephen Tallents, who served as its secretary, the EMB occupied the no man's land between government and private enterprise. It always suffered from the

41 Stefan Schwartzkopf, 'Classes to masses: how advertising agencies responded to the challenges of the mass market in interwar Britain', unpublished paper for the Economic History Society Annual Conference, University of Reading, 31 March–2 April 2006.

42 Australian Raisin Producers Association, *Nice things made with Australian sultanas, c.1926* (author's collection).

43 'Lord Mayor's Day', *The Times*, 5 November 1925, p. 5, col. D.

44 'Practical propaganda', *The Times*, 23 May 1923, p. 7, col. B.



competing interests of both sides and of various factions, as well as from the fact that it had come into being with no clear brief, no precedents to follow, and no appreciation of the enormity of the work before it, although this soon became apparent:

The first summer showed and every succeeding month has endorsed the lesson that the 'furthering of the marketing of Empire Produce in this country' is not merely an affair of the newspaper, the hoarding and the platform. It stretched back through the retail shops and merchant houses, thorough cold stores and the holds of steamers, to the distant harbours and railways and packing sheds and the yet more distant forms where is transacted, no less than across the retailers' counter, the complicated network of Empire development and supply.<sup>45</sup>

The EMB had to explore the *terra incognita* of demand, and reach into every home and kitchen. The EMB was well aware of the importance of women to the success of furthering empire trade. As Amery acknowledged in a speech to the British Women's Patriotic League, by the 1920s women as shoppers and purchasers were responsible for 75% of the everyday expenditure of the country.<sup>46</sup> Amery also appreciated that the EMB had to appeal to as wide a public as possible, and in a practical way. In the early days, when the Board was discussing plans for some kind of housewives' handbook to promote empire food, Amery wrote to Tallents:

The use of any recognized circulation lists would probably exclude the working-class housewife whom it is important to reach. I feel strongly that the book (whatever the distribution) will lack power as a selling agent unless it contains some feature of utility which will induce constant reference to it. I doubt this being achieved by the publication of a mere list of Empire products with their seasonable availability, however artistically it may be designed. Whether the insertion of recipes as I suggested would in itself be sufficient to turn it into a reference book may be doubtful, but I am convinced that some such expedient is necessary.<sup>47</sup>

Unsure exactly how to approach the new women consumers, the EMB began its initial efforts elsewhere. The work was carried out through three sections: Scientific Research, Marketing, and Publicity. Research's objective was to use science to improve empire productivity, while Marketing aimed to provide empire traders with details of market preferences, selling practices, developments in technology and transport, and information on the activities of non-empire competitors. This required good market intelligence, but Marketing soon discovered that, at government level, very little was known about the wholesaling, distribution, and retailing of commodities in Britain. Further, the EMB's initial investigations revealed that 'each commodity has its own problems and for the most part its own system of marketing, so that the whole field of market research has to be surveyed on a commodity basis, with at the same time, a comprehension of the interaction of each component upon

45 *Agricultural economics in the empire: report of a committee appointed by the Empire Marketing Board*, London: HMSO, 1927, p. 12.

46 'Mr Amery on women's influence', *The Times*, 26 May 1925, p. 11, col. B.

47 The National Archives, (henceforth TNA), CO/758/104/5.

another'.<sup>48</sup> Marketing therefore had to begin its work on a commodity-by-commodity basis, while carrying out retail ethnography across the country.

By contrast, largely due to the need for even a quasi-governmental agency to be seen to be even-handed, EMB Publicity had opted for a high-concept approach, having decided, as Tallents put it, that 'its main public appeal should be directed less to advertise particular commodities than to interest the public in the Empire and its development and so create a favourable setting for the advertising of those concerned with the sale of individual Empire products'.<sup>49</sup> The expectation was that this would create a 'consciousness of Empire' that would generate a preference for empire goods in the public mind. This approach lent itself particularly well to grand narratives such as 'transportation' and 'industry', which were the theme of many of the empire posters commissioned by the EMB from leading poster artists such as McKnight Kauffer and Kenneth Shoesmith.<sup>50</sup> Less successfully, commodities were depicted in a generic way, such as 'South African oranges' or 'Fijian coconuts', and in a style reminiscent of travel posters. Specific brands were never mentioned and the element of practical utility was lacking – there were no obvious connections between the posters and the activities of purchasing, preparing, and consuming.

As the EMB's first Christmas loomed, the empire posters had not yet been unveiled to the public and Marketing's preliminary reports had not yet appeared. Mindful of government pressure, the Board decided to make a formal announcement of the forthcoming 'Buy Empire' campaign, which (in a radical departure from government policy) the EMB decided to put in the hands of a professional advertising agency, F. H. Benson Ltd. This agency was known for stylish and amusing promotional campaigns mounted on behalf of British brands such as Rowntree's confectionery, Guinness stout, and Colman's mustard. However, the first advertisement that the agency prepared, following the instructions of the EMB, typified neither the clever playfulness of British advertising nor the slick and 'scientific' American hard sell. Intended for placement in newspapers in October 1926, it began 'Message to the Shopping Public – British First!' and continued:

Buying Empire goods means buying the produce of your own Country and of the Empire Overseas, instead of the produce of foreign countries ... Support your own Best Customers. Last year the Nations of the Empire Overseas spent the enormous sum of nearly £335,000,000 on goods produced in the United Kingdom. Man for man, they are your best customers. And that is a sound practical reason for 'shopping within the Empire' yourself. Every time you buy Canadian salmon, Australian fruit, New Zealand lamb, South African wine, Indian tea, you are dealing with the very people who go out of the way to spend money on the goods made in your own country, and so to create employment, pay wages and increase prosperity here. Buy Empire Goods. Ask – Is it British?<sup>51</sup>

48 'Agricultural economics', p. 12.

49 Institute for Commonwealth Studies, University of London, ICS79, file 25, prologue.

50 Stephen Constantine, *Buy and build: the advertising posters of the Empire Marketing Board*, London: HMSO, 1986.

51 TNA, CO/758/103/6.

Addressed primarily to men in the commercial community and set out in the style of a government manifesto, the announcement was wholly lacking in the popular appeal that Benson's knew to be essential in persuading shoppers to buy goods, especially women shoppers in difficult times.

It was precisely in order to raise interest in, and support for, the empire goods' campaign in the troubled socioeconomic climate of 1926 that King George V and Queen Mary let it be known that their dinner on Christmas night would consist entirely of foods produced within the empire: clear soup, fried fillets of sole, braised York ham with spinach, roast Norfolk turkey stuffed with chestnuts, lettuce salad, and cauliflower soufflé. It was not expected that the menu would be reproduced in every home, but it was hoped that the royal example would be followed in principle.

Exactly what happened next is unclear from the available records, but soon after the first EMB advertisement appeared, and undoubtedly as a direct result of its shortcomings, Benson's suggested advertising a recipe for an empire Christmas pudding like those promoted by the League and the Australian dried-fruit growers, to which the EMB agreed. For Benson's, this was a way around the EMB's requirement that brands should not be promoted. The advertisement appeared in national newspapers in mid-December 1926 (Figure 3). Displayed in a border, it consisted of a simple recipe for an 'empire Xmas pudding', a picture of Britannia carrying a blazing pudding, and a message that emphasized the caring side of empire commerce, typical of the approach that women's groups had used:

Take 1 breakfastcup full of each of the following eight ingredients: Canadian flour, Australian or South African raisins, Australian sultanas, Australian currants, chopped mixed peel, English or Scottish beef suet, breadcrumbs. Also 1 English cooking apple, 4 to 6 eggs (Home laid), 1 teaspoonful pudding spice (Indian), 1 wineglass Jamaica rum, sufficient milk to mix, grated rind and juice of one lemon. One English 3d bit for luck! Mix well. Place in greased basin. Cover with greaseproof paper: tie on cloth and steam or boil 6 to 8 hours.

Here you have a quite simple recipe. It will make as delicious a plum pudding as you have ever tasted. And you will enjoy it all the more if you remember that by using Empire fruit to make it you will give a helping hand to the thousands of British Overseas – most of them ex-Service men and their families – by whom that fruit is grown. Buy Empire Goods. Ask – is it British?<sup>52</sup>

The hand of Benson's can be detected in the illustration of Britannia bearing a pudding, the inclusion of a three-penny piece for luck, and the use of the informal 'Xmas'. In a gesture of royal approval, the King agreed to add the empire pudding to the menu for his Christmas dinner.

More experienced in promotion than the newly formed EMB, the Empire Day Movement swiftly capitalized on the advertisement by mounting a high ritual performance of the sort that the movement had long used to legitimize its activities. The British 'stir-up' custom formed the basis of an elaborate ceremony that was enacted on 20 December

52 TNA, CO/758/94/2.

Figure 3. 'Have an Empire XMAS pudding', The National Archives, Commonwealth Office, CO 758/94/2. Image courtesy of the National Archives.



**Have an EMPIRE  
Xmas Pudding**

*This is How to Make it.*

Take 1 breakfastcupful of each of the following eight ingredients:—  
Canadian flour, Australian or South African raisins, Australian  
sultanas, Australian currants, Demerara sugar, chopped mixed  
peel, English or Scottish beef suet, breadcrumbs. Also 1 English  
cooking apple, 4 to 6 eggs (Home laid), 1 teaspoonful pudding  
spice (Indian), 1 wineglassful Jamaica rum, sufficient milk to mix,  
grated rind and juice of one lemon. One English 3d. bit for luck!

Mix well. Place in greased basin. Cover with greaseproof paper;  
tie on cloth and steam or boil 6 to 8 hours.

Here you have a quite simple recipe. It will  
make as delicious a plum pudding as you have  
ever tasted. And you will enjoy it all the  
more if you remember that, by using Empire  
fruit to make it, you give a helping hand to the  
thousands of British settlers Overseas—most of  
them ex-Service men and their families—by  
whom that fruit is grown.

**Buy**  
**EMPIRE GOODS**

**ASK—IS IT BRITISH?**

ISSUED BY THE EMPIRE MARKETING BOARD

1926 at Vernon House, the headquarters of the Overseas League, on the edge of Green Park in London. Each of the pudding ingredients was carried down the grand stairway leading from the mansion to the garden by uniformed pages and Indian servants. Once in the garden, the ingredient was formally 'announced', as though it were a person being presented

at court or at a ball – very like Mr Oldknow's dream, which seems by then to have been forgotten – before being added to the receptacle in which the pudding was being prepared under the direction of the chef of the Overseas League.

On this occasion, when the final English egg had been broken into the mixture, the pudding was stirred in turn by representatives of Canada, Australia, South Africa, India, British Guiana, and Jamaica, and by the chairman of the Empire Day Movement and a representative of the EMB, concluding in a toast to 'The King's Empire Christmas Pudding', proposed by Lord Meath, who, *The Times* reported, went on to say:

the acceptance by the King of a pudding composed exclusively of ingredients produced in the British Empire was an act of real value to the Empire. It could not fail to touch the imagination of every British family party. When the pudding was carried to the Royal table next Saturday, it would furnish a symbol of Imperial unity and an epitome of inter-Empire trade. If the Royal example were followed by housewives throughout the Empire they would, in some measure, have laid the foundations of Inter-Empire trade, not only symbolically but in actual practical fact. If the whole Empire confined itself, on Christmas Day, to the use, in its puddings, of Australian currants, that fact alone would go a long way to setting the new Australian dried fruit industry on its feet. If the British housewife, when shopping for Christmas, got the habit of putting in the word 'Empire' before the commodity which she was buying, she would not lose the habit the whole year round.<sup>53</sup>

Plans for the 1926 pudding were so hasty that a number of empire partners were overlooked. The Irish Free State, New Zealand, Newfoundland, Scotland, and Wales were among those who complained about having been left out. On 23 December, just before the King's pudding was supposed to be delivered to the palace, the Colonial Commissioner for Cyprus rang the offices of the Empire Day Movement to insist that no truly British Christmas pudding could be served without brandy sauce. Cyprus was a producer of brandy and the Commissioner offered to supply the missing ingredient. The offer was accepted and the empire pudding, with the brandy, was duly taken to the gates of Buckingham Palace in a gilt basket carried by a pageboy. There, it was received by Sir Derek Keppel, Master of the Household, who undertook to convey it to Sandringham in time for the royal Christmas dinner.<sup>54</sup>

The recipe for the empire pudding only appeared in the national papers in mid-December but, despite the late start, it had exactly the wide popular appeal that the EMB wanted. It aroused such great public interest in Britain and abroad that *The Times* was able to report that the publicity campaign had a marked effect upon the retail marketing of Christmas fare in London and across the country in the days leading up to Christmas. For the EMB, it was a lesson in the power of royalty, Christmas, and the pudding, of which they were determined to take advantage by promoting an even more elaborate pudding the following year.

53 'Empire Christmas pudding – a gift for The King', *The Times*, 21 December 1926, p. 9, col. B.

54 'Empire Christmas pudding for The King', *The Times*, 23 December 1926, p. 12, col. C.

## The King's Christmas pudding

Accordingly, while the subject was still warm, as he put it, on 11 February 1927, Leo Amery, head of the EMB, wrote to the Master of the Royal Household:

My dear Keppel,

You were very kind last December in helping to forward the suggestion that the King and Queen might confine their dinner on Christmas evening to foods produced within the Empire. Might I ask your advice again upon a somewhat similar project for next Christmas?

Last autumn at short notice the Empire Marketing Board published a recipe for an Empire Christmas pudding. The recipe was, in fact, provided by our advertising agents and we should like to prepare for publication next autumn, about the time when people are making their Christmas puddings, a fuller recipe with a note of the various parts of the Empire from which each particular ingredient can be obtained. We want to give a full share of the ingredients to the home country, but we also want to include as many of the overseas parts of the Empire as we can possibly find room for.

It has been suggested that possibly Their Majesties would permit their own chef to provide us for this purpose with a recipe for an Empire Christmas pudding, and to permit us to make known the source from which the recipe had been obtained. Given the recipe, and such brief instructions for the making of the pudding as might seem necessary, we would be responsible for allotting the different ingredients among the different parts of the Empire.

I write, therefore, to ask whether you would feel this suggestion to be suitable for submission to the King. There is no doubt that the idea of an Empire Christmas pudding, which was improvised last autumn, could be used to greater advantage next October or November, and the Empire Marketing Board would feel much honoured, as their work would be notably reinforced, if Their Majesties felt able to assist their purpose in the manner described.<sup>55</sup>

The reply from the palace was swift and positive. Keppel responded: 'The King and Queen are entirely in sympathy with your object and have been graciously pleased to grant the necessary permission'. Enclosed was a Christmas pudding recipe obtained from the royal chef, André Cédard.

As recorded in Stephen Tallents' papers,<sup>56</sup> the royal recipe presented the EMB with two immediate challenges. The first had to do with quantities. The royal recipe was big enough to serve forty people, for the royal kitchen still made and distributed Christmas puddings as of old, and the recipe had to be scaled down to make a pudding suitable for an ordinary family, serving eight people. The second problem involved the ingredients. While the palace had supplied the recipe, it was up to the EMB to apportion the origins of the ingredients in such a way that all parts of the empire would get a fair mention and, hopefully, an increase in trade. Considerable politicking was involved. Both Cyprus (brandy) and the West Indies (nutmeg), whose products had been inadvertently overlooked in the empire pudding of

<sup>55</sup> TNA, CO/758.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, CO/758/106/4.



1926, made special representations. These disagreements foreshadowed problems that would later hamper the work of the EMB, prime among them that the same foodstuffs were produced in a number of empire countries.

The recipe went through several drafts, with different countries lobbying on behalf of their produce. The term 'United Kingdom' was substituted for 'Great Britain' and there was disapproval in Northern Ireland that the 'Irish Free State' had been mentioned while they had not. In the end, as it proved impossible to involve everyone in the making of the 1927 pudding without changing the recipe, the EMB wrote to Monsieur Cédard for his approval of the addition of 'pudding spice from India' to his original ingredients. As the EMB explained to the chef, 'This was the only way we saw a chance of getting India into it'. In the event, by the time the recipe was finalized, India was mentioned twice. The comparison between the printed recipe for the King's pudding and the empire pudding of the previous year is instructive. The recipe for the King's pudding had immense culinary gravitas. 'Christmas' was fully spelled out, there were no pictures of Britannia, no three-penny piece in the pudding, no commercial message, and no instructions on how the pudding should be cooked (Figure 4).

With the royal recipe in hand, the EMB launched into promoting it well in advance of the Christmas season. A poster entitled 'Making the Empire Christmas Pudding' was commissioned, the recipe was sent to national newspapers and women's magazines at home and abroad, leaflets carrying the royal recipe were printed and offered free to the public, and representatives were dispatched around the country to demonstrate pudding-making techniques. Even the most optimistic members of the EMB were overwhelmed by the success of the King's Christmas pudding. Requests for the recipe flooded in by the hundreds and then by the thousands. There was no precedent in government practice or in the commercial world – it became the most famous recipe in the world. Requests for the recipe came from the kingdom, the colonies and dominions, and the world at large. They came from colleges, churches, libraries, hotels, bakeries, inns, golf clubs, social clubs, British consulates, and schools – including a request for twenty-five copies from a schoolmaster in Kent, who thought it would prove very useful as a practical geography lesson. Most of the requests came from private homes of all kinds – manor houses, farms, bungalows, charity dwellings, vicarages, cottages, townhouses in London squares, mansion blocks, lodges, workers' housing, and even palaces, with staff at Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle writing in for copies.<sup>57</sup> They went, too, to people who could only be contacted care of a post office or shop, but who still wanted a copy of the talismanic recipe.

On 2 December 1927, the King's Christmas pudding was ritually prepared at an elaborate stir-up ceremony that had all the solemnity of antiquity, although it was only the second of its kind. On this occasion, the pudding was mixed on the roof of Adelaide House at London Bridge, within sight of the West India docks, through which many of its ingredients would have entered Britain. Prior to the ceremony, the pudding ingredients were conveyed from the Royal Colonial Institute to Adelaide House in decorated cars. These were attended by 'young men and women attired in costumes more or less indicative of their place of origin', and the procession was captured on newsreel film shown around the world. At

<sup>57</sup> TNA, CO/758/106/5.



Figure 4. 'The Empire Christmas pudding', The National Archives, Commonwealth Office, CO 958. Image courtesy of the National Archives. This version of the recipe gives the original quantities, as provided by the royal chef. When modified by the EMB to serve eight persons, the quantities were as follows: currants, sultanas, and raisins, 1 lb each; minced apple, 5 oz; breadcrumbs and beef suet, 1 lb each; cut candied peel, 6 oz; flour and demerara sugar, 8 oz each; eggs, 5; cinnamon, ½ oz; ground cloves and ground nutmeg, ¼ oz each; pudding spice, ¼ teaspoon; brandy, ¼ gill; rum, ½ gill; beer, 1 pint.



The King's Chef, Mr. Cédard, with  
Their Majesties' gracious consent, has supplied  
to the Empire Marketing Board  
the following recipe for

## An Empire Christmas Pudding

5 lbs. of currants	*	AUSTRALIA
5 " " sultanas	*	AUSTRALIA
5 " " stoned raisins	*	SOUTH AFRICA
1½ " " minced apple	*	CANADA
5 " " bread crumbs	*	UNITED KINGDOM
5 " " beef suet	*	NEW ZEALAND
2 " " cut candied peel	*	SOUTH AFRICA
2½ " " flour	*	UNITED KINGDOM
2½ " " demerara sugar	*	WEST INDIES
20 eggs	*	IRISH FREE STATE
2 ozs. ground cinnamon	*	CEYLON
1½ ozs. ground cloves	*	ZANZIBAR
1½ ozs. ground nutmegs	*	STRAITS SETTLEMENTS
1 teaspoonful pudding spice	*	INDIA
1 gill brandy	*	CYPRUS
2 gills rum	*	JAMAICA
2 quarts old beer	*	ENGLAND

*Recipes for a sauce and for brandy butter, also made  
exclusively from Empire ingredients, to accompany the pudding  
have also been supplied by His Majesty's Chef. Copies can be obtained free on  
application to the Empire Marketing Board, 2 Queen Anne's Gate Bldgs., London, S.W.1*

Adelaide House, the pudding was stirred by representatives of the countries that had contributed ingredients and then taken to the kitchens of Mansion House, where the Lord Mayor of London oversaw its placing in a kettle to boil. The pudding, which weighed forty pounds, would take twenty-six hours to cook. After the toast to 'The King's Christmas Pudding', which concluded the ceremony, Lord Meath gave the by now customary address. Noting that the pudding was a gift from the Empire Day Movement, and had been accepted by the king in the hope that the public would be encouraged to buy empire ingredients for their own Christmas fare, Lord Meath went on to say that, in his belief,

the Empire Marketing Board and the various Dominion trade authorities, in attempting to penetrate direct into the kitchens of the nation, were adopting the very best way of strengthening Imperial ties and sentiment, and increasing trade between the Homeland and the Dominions. The British housewife, he concluded, would make or mar Empire trade, and Empire propaganda, inspired by the one thought of inducing the housewife to say 'Empire currants' instead of just 'currants' must ultimately make a profound impression on the demand for Empire goods.<sup>58</sup>

The King's Christmas pudding remained a fixture of the empire holiday season for many years. The recipe appeared in a number of cookbooks and magazines, while the leaflets were kept and passed down through families. Occasionally, businesses would reprint it and pass it out to their customers, sometimes altering the ingredients to suit their own purposes. Thus, a South African vintner in St James's substituted South African brandy for the Cyprus product, but this did not matter because it was still a recipe for empire. The King's pudding spawned its own family of puddings – there was a Prince of Wales pudding, a Lord Mayor's pudding, and various municipal puddings, all with empire themes and linked to empire promotions. They included a giant pudding, seven feet high, created for the Universal Food and Cookery Exhibition at Olympia in 1928. Its ingredients weighed a ton, and pieces of it were distributed to hospitals and charitable foundations.<sup>59</sup>

Over time, the EMB issued a number of posters and postcards with a Christmas theme, including 'From Christmas to Christmas May Empire Trade Increase', and 'Let the Whole Empire Load the Christmas Tree'. There were no medieval scenes of 'Merrie England', for the imagery of the Christmas posters was contemporary, with one exception: the poster entitled 'The Empire is One Large Family' carried an image of Charles Dickens (Figure 5), recalling the heyday of empire trade.

The first empire pudding recipe had shown the way. From then on, the EMB published recipes for empire produce, which appeared in newspapers and women's magazines, were given out free as leaflets, and were read out in the household programmes of the BBC. The EMB also distributed recipes at empire shopping weeks staged in towns and cities nationally, held empire food lectures and demonstrations around the country, and sponsored grocery and retail displays for which it provided bunting and awards. These took place all year round, but Christmas remained the most popular arena for the EMB's culinary promotions. Another highly successful EMB publication was *Christmas Fare from the*

58 'The King's Christmas Fare', *The Times*, 2 December 1927, p. 11, col. C.

59 'Cookery at Olympia', *The Times*, 24 November 1928, p. 9, col. B.

Figure 5. *A merry Christmas to us all: the Empire is one large family*, The National Archives, Commonwealth Office, CO 956/510. Image courtesy of the National Archives.



*Empire* (Figure 6), a comprehensive booklet that listed all possible empire products that might be wanted for the holiday, along with the royal chef's recipe for mince pies, and a recipe for an empire Christmas cake.

## Conclusions

In 1933, the government took the decision to close down the EMB, despite objections in the press that the decision was short-sighted, wrong-headed, and a false economy, and despite protests from the British Empire Producers Association, the Grocer's Federation, women's groups, other organizations, and members of the public. Among the reasons given were

Figure 6. *Buy here: your Christmas fare from the Empire*, The National Archives, Commonwealth Office, CO 956/57. Image courtesy of the National Archives.



the economic depression of the early 1930s and the hostility of the Treasury Department.<sup>60</sup> To these can be added the unwillingness or inability of some colonies to contribute to the cost of the EMB's work, and irregular and insufficient funding from the British government. The promotion of empire produce by private organizations, producers, and women's groups, which had pre-dated the establishment of the EMB, continued after its demise, with the King's Christmas pudding always a focus of activity.

David Cannadine has identified the historically specific recasting of the British monarchy as a kind of secular religion, in which moral, cultural, and spiritual authority replaced political power.<sup>61</sup> From this perspective, the empire was seen as a family, the king as its paternal head or father, and patriotism as the highest form of belief. Independently, Christmas had become the holiday that defined and enshrined tradition, Englishness, and then empire, with the pudding as its emblematic dish. In the 1920s, light had not yet been let in on the magic of royalty, and Christmas was the great annual ritual in which the royal family, the nuclear family, and the national family were conflated.<sup>62</sup> To this trinity, a fourth element was now added – the empire family. The incorporation of specifically empire ingredients in a symbolic dish made especially for the king, and the partaking of the royal pudding in households throughout the kingdom, the dominions, and the colonies that Christmas Day of 1927, was an act of secular communion, the enacting of empire through consumption. It emerged as a unifying force during a time of social dissent and division at home and abroad, and it appealed to the public on many levels and across social classes.

To begin, the King's Christmas pudding was highly popular with the new breed of women consumers. It validated the social activism of women previously engaged in the empire and related movement; it was a gift to all the women to whom Christmas dinner in general, and the pudding in particular, were the ultimate test of their skills and taste as cook or hostess; it empowered women by giving them the opportunity to practise critical consumption. Retailers and wholesalers welcomed the promotion of the King's Christmas pudding and empire ingredients as an additional spur to trade. After EMB initiatives, Sainsbury, for example, actively promoted 'Empire' goods across their product range and the firm's Christmas advertisements began to specify the origins of dried fruit: 'Australian sultan'; 'Special Offer for your Christmas Pudding and Mincemeat – try our Empire Raisins'. Origins had always been important in the luxury trade, and now they acquired a more general political significance. Above all, as a recipe the King's Christmas pudding provided the vital link between production and consumption, becoming an instrument of social action.

Historians of the interwar years have been bemused by the prominence given to the King's Christmas pudding by the EMB, and by the warmth of its public reception. They have also overlooked the various empire puddings that preceded it, all of which should be seen as materializations of the strength of popular feeling for the empire, expressed through

60 Robert Self, 'Treasury control and the Empire Marketing Board: the rise and fall of non-tariff preference in Britain, 1924–1933', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5, 2, 1994, p. 153; Stephen Constantine, 'Bringing the Empire alive', in John M. McKenzie, ed., *Imperialism and popular culture*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986, pp. 192–231; idem, *Buy and build*.

61 David Cannadine, 'The context, performance and meaning of ritual: the British Monarchy and the "invention of tradition", c. 1820–1977', in Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The invention of tradition*, p. 152.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

its long-established symbol. It may seem naïve to think that a pudding could change the course of history, yet the belief in the efficacy of small things lies at the heart of all religions, sacred or secular. Such a belief had already been prominent in patriotic campaigns against food waste during the First World War. The King's Christmas pudding might have ushered in a new era of imperial self-sufficiency, as envisioned by Lord Meath, but that was not to be. In addition to emergent forces of globalization that would prove irresistible after the Second World War, there were conflicts within the empire, glimpsed in the rivalries behind the recipe for the King's Christmas pudding and encountered on the ground by EMB Marketing.

American imports were damaging empire producers but as great a threat came from competing empire commodities. South Africa was in the early stages of developing a dried-fruit industry, which would one day rival Australia's, and it was not clear how this would be resolved. Competition already afflicted a number of commodities, one example being fresh apples. Apples from New Zealand and Australia, in the southern hemisphere, came to Britain when the English crop was not in season, but Canadian apples, which matured at the same time as the home crop, were seen as a serious threat by home growers. Despite the frequent use by the EMB of the slogan 'Empire buying begins at home', and consistent efforts to 'urge the public to buy home products first and overseas Empire products second', many home producers remained convinced that the activities of the EMB were being conducted to their disadvantage. This led to disagreements about terminology. Did 'British' mean produced in the empire, or produced in Britain? Advertisements such as 'Tasmanian apples – British to the core' infuriated British growers, and confused shoppers. To further complicate matters, when foreign, non-empire firms opened offices in Britain, their true nationality was often obscured. Decades of free trade had muddied the issue of origins in the public mind, and additional difficulties were posed by the problem of choice.

In the absence of formal protective tariffs, to remain competitive and give their customers the widest choice and biggest savings, traders in Britain could not afford to stay within the empire, for foreign goods were often cheaper. Choice was not just for the rich: working class cooperative societies such as the Cooperative Wholesale Society – whose female director sat on the EMB Publicity Board – were major buyers from cheaper non-Empire foreign producers, in order to benefit their members.<sup>63</sup> Even staying within the empire, retailers often found their loyalties divided when they had to choose between colonial and home-grown products and producers. On the personal level, choice also caught consumers in a conflict of values. Women might be more responsive to the 'family' aspect of empire than men, but against this they had to set the perceived welfare of their own family, whether on the basis of price, quality, or the putative benefits of non-empire brands that were being promoted by advertisers. Could patriotism outweigh the appeal of foreign foods that claimed to make children healthy? Could they justify spending a few pence more on empire produce to benefit unknown people far away, when the money saved on low-priced, non-empire imports could provide the family with an extra bit of luxury or comfort? Unresolved in the interwar years, these questions and choices confront the contemporary consumer and the global food industry today.

63 *The Cooperative Wholesale Society at home and abroad*, Manchester: The Cooperative Wholesale Society, c.1936.



Undeniably, imports to Britain of empire-produced foodstuffs increased significantly during the interwar years, for which women's groups, other organizations, the EMB, and the public must all take credit. Together, they created a consciousness of empire that linked political and moral imperatives with material life through practice, in the face of global trends and opposition from the government and other interests. In this the King's Christmas pudding was central, and it continued to play an important cultural and commercial role until the outbreak of the Second World War. To answer the question posed by Hobsbawm, the success of the King's Christmas pudding was due equally to manipulation and to pre-existing needs and sentiment. Despite tremendous will and effort, the cause symbolized by the pudding was not won. Yet once a year, internal and external differences and difficulties were set aside in the celebration of Christmas, and this is where the true significance and value of the King's Christmas pudding in the interwar years lie. In a world that would soon change out of all recognition, it gave nation and empire back their Merry Christmas.

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