

# Opossum Hot Pot: Cooking at the Margins in Colonial New Zealand

Lydia Wevers



Fig. 1: “Open Hearth Cooking,” Kent Plantation House, photograph B.  
Hathorn, Wikimedia Commons

When Mina Murray takes her friend Lucy Westenra for a long walk to tire her out in the—forlorn—hope of preventing her sleepwalking in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, they finish with a “capital ‘severe tea’ at Robin Hood’s Bay in a sweet little old-fashioned inn . . . I believe we should have shocked the ‘New Woman’ with our appetites,” the conservative heroine Mina remarks (85). Famous for her appetites, the New Woman represented everything nice girls should not be: sexually active, even, as Mina notes, to the point of doing the proposing herself; intellectually and politically assertive; and hungry. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg pointed out in 1988, the appetite is a voice, and may constitute a form of rhetorical behaviour.

Rhetorical behaviour is not easily separated from appetites and bodies in any discourse, and in the nineteenth century many factors were at play in discourses of food. The powerful roles of class and gender are perhaps never as strongly marked as in domestic and culinary spaces, and both the industrial revolution and British imperialism are materialised in discourses of food and domestic work. As London modernised and industrialised in the 1850s, the class divide between those who prepared food and those who ate it hardened. Andrea Bloomfield and Judith Flanders, among others, have described the differences made by improvements in food transport, storage and cooking. For example, as the closed iron range became more affordable in the second half of the century, the preparation of food was consigned to the servants and their employers practised culinary ignorance and refined consumption. These social and psychological boundaries, so evident in nineteenth-century fiction, open out many linked discourses—economies of time and labour, consumption and restriction, the politics of wealth and nativism, to name but a few—which come under pressure when their practising

subjects remove themselves to a colony on the other side of the world. How did the New Woman interface with colonial conditions? How does the provision and consumption of food continue to police class and polite behaviour? How is Britishness maintained when resources are limited or food sources unfamiliar? What is British food? The last is a question that seems particularly relevant in the wake of Brexit.

Before Captain Cook introduced some European plants and the pig to New Zealand in the 1770s the main source of protein in Aotearoa was seafood (including seals) and birds, and there was a disastrous shortage of carbohydrates (Leach 33). Maori grew *kumara* and some yams, which they had brought with them from their Polynesian homeland; they harvested fern root and tree ferns, which ruined their teeth and were hard to process. Their hunger for carbohydrate was so great that, as George Forster recorded in *A Voyage Round the World*, when Cook's second voyage jettisoned a pile of ship's biscuit on the beach in Queen Charlotte Sound because it was so far gone with mould and rot that even the ship's pigs wouldn't touch it, Maori "fell to . . . and consumed it all" (Leach 33, Forster 282). By 1801 there were fields of potatoes near Thames, and Maori proved to be skilled horticulturalists, supplying produce to ships and other markets for a number of decades. Their expertise is illustrated by a feast held in 1846 to celebrate peace between two warring tribes which offered 8000 baskets of potatoes, half a million eels, and 900 pigs to 4000 participants (Leach 40).

But as Helen Leach has pointed out, Maori culinary traditions—the *hangi* oven, fermented corn, dried eels adorning their *pa* for the winter—became invisible in mainstream publications. Demonstrating that this was still the case a hundred years later is an advertisement placed by the New Zealand Wildlife Service in *Gunshot*, a magazine for shooters:

Few people realise that the *pukeko* is an excellent table bird and is ideally suited to either braising or stewing. Use only the breasts and legs and remove the stringy tendons from the latter by breaking the knee-joint and winding the exposed sinews around the shank of the leg. ("New Zealand's Game Birds" frontispiece)

For most Europeans Maori cookery, as Leach puts it, was a "quaint survival from a prehistoric era" by the 1870s, and only those who travelled into remote areas experienced traditional foods (41). In colonial New Zealand, Maori cooking was embedded in a long-running racist stereotype which is exemplified by these facetious "recipes" published in a cookbook of 1905:

### *Ancient Maori Recipes.*

I enclose a translation of an ancient document recently discovered in an old Maori oven in the North Island, and which evidently was torn out of an ancient Maori cookery book. It has been carefully translated by an eminent Maori scholar and reads as follows: —

Baked Warrior (also called "Long Pig")



Fig. 2: "Swamp Hens (Pukekos)" J. G. Keulemans, chromolithograph, W. Buller's *The History of the Birds of New Zealand* (1888)

Select a well-tattooed warrior—the tattoo signifying rank, and, as in all cases when cooking game, the higher the rank the better—lay him, with a plentiful supply of green leaves, in the oven; cover over with earth, &c. Then serve quickly, garnished with flax leaves and *raupo* sticks. Seasonable after a battle. Sufficient for a whole tribe:

*Pakeha a la tohunga* (an entrée)

This is a favourite dish round about mission stations.

Ingredients: *Pakeha* steaks, Dried Shark (well matured), *Kumaras*, Pork Fat, Mutton Fish, and *Karaka* Berries. (Brandon and Smith *Ukneadit* cited Leach 50).

While traditional Maori food was not recognisably present in colonial cuisine, there was a suite of distinctive foodstuffs and cooking behaviours that characterised a developing colonial tradition. These included eels, not an unfamiliar food for British colonists, New Zealand pigeons (*kererū*) and *pukeko* (swamp hens). Both eels and pigeons (unprotected in the nineteenth century) were plentiful. But British methods of cooking them were not necessarily suitable, and the colonists found they could learn from Maori how best to prepare the local fauna for consumption. Not everyone was as lucky as Lady Barker, who gave the eels she and her husband and friend had caught on a night expedition to their shepherd:

[He] assured me that if I entrusted them to my cook she would send up such an oily dish that I should never be able to endure an eel again. He declared that the Maoris, who seem to have rather a horror of grease, had taught him how to cook both eels and *wekas* ['bush hens'] in such a way as to eliminate every particle of fat from both. I had no experience of the latter dish, but he certainly kept his word about the eels, for they were excellent. (Barker, *Station Amusements* 45)

One of the big shifts for English emigrants to New Zealand was a return to individual labour. New technologies had significantly improved British kitchens and food infrastructure by mid-century, allowing space for the many refinements that played out class attitudes to food and cooking, but for immigrants to New Zealand simple old-fashioned hearth cooking was a universal aspect of colonial life. As late as 1889 the *New Zealand Exhibition Cookery Book* advised its readers that roasting before an open fire was a rather uncommon process in the Colony, “only a limited number of houses being fitted with suitable ranges. Shut-up stoves of various kinds, and gas stoves, are mostly used, and the Colonial oven is still preferred by many” (72).

A colonial or camp oven is used over a fire, which obviously involves far more work. The camp oven, a heavy cast-iron pot, derives from the seventeenth-century Dutch oven. The heavy iron lidded pot functioned as an oven—either on tripod legs or hung from a chain over an outdoor or indoor fire—making it suitable for the kind of cooking that early settlers had to do (Fig. 1). The fire had to be lit and stoked, necessitating a constant supply of dry split firewood. During the 1890s depression when crowds of swaggers (itinerant workers) roamed New Zealand and Australia in search of work, splitting firewood was the usual price for a meal and a bed for the night (Wevers 108).

The *New Zealand Exhibition Cookery Book* was also discouraging about the labour potential of many immigrants:

Married women, more deeply versed in ball-room gossip than in the arts of boiling or frying, should set their faces against emigration, unless they intend to turn over a new leaf. Unmarried girls may emigrate but they must condescend to become useful as well as agreeable. (2)

A labour solution that seemed obvious to early arrivals was the indigenous population, but young Maori women did not display an immediate readiness to take on the role of the British servant. Lady Martin remarked that the missionary wife in the wilds of New Zealand “herself must wash and cook and bake until she has trained her raw material, and when the native helps have at last been taught to work they need constant overlooking” (*Our Maoris* Ch. 2). Marianne Williams complained in 1824 that the “very best of them,” that is the “native girl,” will “on a hot day go (just when you are longing for someone to take the baby) and swim, after which she will go to sleep for 2 or 3 hours . . . If they are not in the humour to do anything you tell them, they will not understand you” (Fitzgerald 80). Despite her exhausting daily routines Williams also found satisfaction in domestic work:

When my pantry shelves are scrubbed, the floor mopped and it contains as it will tomorrow afternoon, a round of boiled beef, a roast leg of pork, a rhubarb pie, 15 large loaves and 8 lbs of fresh butter . . . I feel as self-satisfied and proud as a mortal can. (Brewis 58)

In 1865, Lady Mary Anne Barker, newly married to her second husband Frederick Broome, arrived in Canterbury, where he was to establish a sheep run. Her experiences in the foothills of the Southern Alps produced two best-selling and greatly loved books—*Station Life in New Zealand* (1870), followed by *Station Amusements in New Zealand* (1873).<sup>1</sup> Lady Barker conformed to the stereotype of the married woman described by Lady Martin in her ignorance of domestic work, but in some respects she was an early model of the New Woman. She went on wild pig hunts with her husband and his business partner, accompanied him on demanding horseback journeys through the Alps, helped muster sheep, raised chickens and pigs, grew vegetables, and taught herself to cook. She was, as she put it herself, always hungry—and her first child was born eight and a half months after marriage. On riding picnics with her husband and other men (she was almost always the only woman in the party), she insisted on taking a china tea-cup and a teapot. Lady Barker’s freedoms were partly derived from and reflected her class, as were her domestic behaviours, and in that respect she exemplifies the emigrants of the Canterbury Association, who saw themselves as a southern gentry. Never loath to try her hand at anything that was necessary or looked like fun, she went about it in an emphatically English upper-class way, with her Delft china ware. In this respect she represents an earlier mode of domestic behaviour, rather than the colonial woman later in the century.

Lady Barker employed a continuous succession of servant girls, who were problematic for various reasons. The first lot were “nice tidy girls” and “as a natural consequence of these attractive qualities they have both left me to be married” (*Station Life* 67). The ratio of men to women in New Zealand in the 1860s was 163 men to every 100 women and at least 10 to 1 in rural areas. It was hard for anyone to keep young female workers, especially if you lived fifty miles from the nearest shop. But it wasn’t axiomatic that they would know how to cook. After the first lot of servants left, Lady Barker, her husband, the cadet, a clergyman’s son, and the boy who milked the cows had to fend for themselves in what she called “this picnic

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<sup>1</sup> *Station Life in New Zealand* by Lady Barker has been republished with Introduction and Notes by Betty Gilderdale. Auckland: Random House, 2010. Quotations in this paper are from the 1870 edn.

life" (*Station Life* 68). They were all, she declared cheerfully, "equally ignorant of practical cookery" and, of course, the effort rested on her shoulders. The hardest thing she found was baking bread, particularly making and coping with yeast, which, shaken violently in its champagne bottle by Frederick, flew up to the ceiling like a pistol shot and descended on her head. The resulting loaf remained raw inside and she had no more yeast "so we lived on biscuits and potatoes until the dray returned at the end of the week, bringing however, only one servant." The new servant was Irish, and as inexperienced as her employer, who nevertheless relayed a view of her that recirculated entrenched class and ethnic stereotypes, describing "Meary" as fascinated with the mangle, mangling her apron twenty times a day and always astounded by its smoothness (*Station Life* 67-70).

Part of the problem, as Lady Barker observed, was cookbooks. In *Station Amusements* she returns to an observation made in her earlier book that cookbooks are no use to people like her because they assume a rudimentary prior knowledge of cooking on the part of the reader. It is interesting to think about the implied reader of nineteenth-century cookbooks. As there was no specifically colonial cookbook available to Lady Barker during her tenure in New Zealand, she can only be referring to cookbooks produced for the British market. A popular cookbook of the time was Mrs. Beeton's *Book of Household Management* published in 1861. Written when Isabella Beeton was in her twenties and had no experience of running a household, Kathryn Hughes points out that it was:

. . . aimed at a generation of middle-class women who, for the first time in history, had not learned household skills from their mothers. New codes of gentility meant that young women in the 1850s were more likely to know how to play the piano and converse in French than they were to bake bread or make their own clothes. (n.p.)

Mrs. Beeton had no personal experience of cooking and lifted her recipes from other cookbooks but hers was the first to list ingredients at the head of recipes. Lady Barker's complaints (which suggest that her cookbooks were not as modern as Mrs. Beeton) mirror this inexperience. She expostulates:

I want to lodge a formal complaint against all cookery books. They are not the least use in the world until you know how to cook! And then you can do without them. Somebody ought to write a cookery book which would tell an unhappy beginner whether the water in which she proposes to put her potatoes is to be hot or cold; how long such water is to boil; how she is to know whether the potatoes are done enough; how to dry them after they are boiled and similar things, which make all the difference.

To speak like Mr. Brooke for a moment. "Rice now: I have dabbled in that a good deal myself, and found it wouldn't do at all." (*Station Amusements* 193)

In fact, as her biographer notes, when she returned to England, Lady Barker was almost certainly the only woman in her social circle to actually have made bread, cakes and puddings (Gilderdale, *Seven Lives* 154).

Lady Barker, as we have seen, also enjoyed practical advice from those who had more experience of living in the backblocks. In "Christmas Day In New Zealand: The Shepherd's Story" (1871), for example, Bob the shepherd reminisces about life just a few years earlier, before the Barkers arrived:

As for Christmas Day, we never thought of it beyond wondering what sort of ‘duff’ we were going to have. That’s colonial for a pudding, ma’am, you know, don’t you? If we had a couple of handfuls of currants and raisins, we shoved them into a lot of flour and sugar, and we put a bit of mutton fat into the middle, and tied it all up together in the sleeve of an old flannel shirt and boiled it, and it used to come out a first-rate plum duff, and we thought we had had no end of a Christmas if we could manage such a pudding as that. But we could not always get even a holiday on Christmas Day, because of the shearing. Shearers were too scarce in those days, and wages too high to miss a day’s work, so it often happened that we had to work just as hard, or harder on Christmas than on any other day of the year. (“Christmas in New Zealand” Ch. 3)

By contrast, in 1866 Lady Barker presided over a traditional Christmas feast for the workers, despite the fact that it was “far from being a festive, idle season.” She explains in “Christmas in New Zealand” that Christmas falls at midsummer, the busiest time of the year on the station, with thousands of sheep to be mustered. Nonetheless, she declares:

Of course Christmas Day would be a complete holiday, and we had invited shearers and musterers, and all the odd hands which flock to a station at shearing-time, to come up to our house, which stood in a valley a mile or so away from the sheep-yards, wool-shed, &c., and attend first a church service and then a good dinner, the day to wind up with athletic games. (“Christmas in New Zealand” Ch. 1)

The rituals of church, dinner and recreational sports were Lady Barker’s way of providing traditional British hospitality for the station’s workforce. The meal itself was “a substantial dinner of beef and poultry, for the great point is to have no mutton at a party in New Zealand,” followed by “huge dishes of cherries and strawberries (presents from my neighbours’ gardens on either side of the ranges” and—for it was Christmas after all—“quantities of plum-cake if they could possibly eat it” (“Christmas in New Zealand” Ch. 1).

The monotony of the foodstuffs on offer was a large part of what Lady Barker and colonial cooks outside the larger towns had to grapple with. On stations and in outlying districts, an unrelenting staple diet of mutton and flour was supplemented by occasional pork, poultry, and seasonal fruits and vegetables if you could grow them. Beef was a luxury reserved for Christmas. All the plants in Lady Barker’s garden were blown out by a westerly gale the first year and, in 1867, most of the sheep, all the poultry, and the garden were destroyed by an enormous six-day snow storm, which reduced the household to starvation as food supplies ran out. They were reduced to making cakes out of the chicken feed. But, as Lady Barker’s accounts of Christmas Day festivities made clear, it “is a point of honour to have as little mutton as possible on these occasions, as the greater treat is the complete change of fare” (*Station Life* 102), mutton being invariably the *plat du jour*. It took a very long time for this to change. In 1907 a clerk on a North Island sheep station wrote of his joy at being given some trout and eels to eat, instead of the “2 shoulders of small shrunken mutton on my table every day without a break” (Wevers 120). Colonial cook books and recipes reflect these narratives, reflecting the narrowness of choice for settlers unable to access familiar foodstuffs or to make full use of local resources.

One of the first “New Zealand” cookbooks (as opposed to recipes published in newspaper columns or useful guides) was the *New Zealand Exhibition Cookery Book*, published in Nelson in 1889 by Isobel M. Broad. Isobel Broad’s recipes were, as Helen Leach has pointed out, more consciously national than those in *Brett’s Colonists Guide* published six years before. The introduction declares that all the recipes have been “carefully adapted to the

materials obtainable in the colony” (1). There are, for example, eight pages about oysters, and a number of recipes, as shown above, for *pukeko* or swamp hens, *kererū* or wood pigeons, eels, and *kaka* (a native New Zealand parrot). Broad emphasised New Zealand fish species and provided a recipe for a local fish stew, alongside other recipes for hare, quail, pheasant and venison. As Leach notes, the inclusion of game and other “upper-crust” English recipes seem to be “tailored to meet the tastes of the gentlemen members of the Nelson Club” and in this respect Broad perpetuates a version of high table English fare. The “Game” chapter has ten pages of recipes, with one for “Quail Braised” subtitled “Nelson Club recipe.” Some of Broad’s recipes occupy a mode that seems characteristically colonial, in that they simulate British, or European, upper-class food. It is perhaps a step too far to take this to Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, but there is a sense in which some colonial cooking is constantly trying to re-establish a scene of class and taste in a social and physical environment which draws attention to the opposite. It is a kind of mimicry. Colonial Goose (a stuffed leg of mutton pushed into the shape of a goose) is the most obvious of these simulated refinements,<sup>2</sup> but Isobel Broad includes, for example, a recipe for imitation crab featuring minced chicken mixed with a number of commercially produced sauces and leg of mutton stuffed with herrings—which seems rather desperate. These recipes, perhaps, answer one of my opening questions about what British food might be. In the colonial New Zealand cookbook, the unquestioned culinary norm is the reproduction so far as possible of British dishes, cooking techniques and culinary class distinctions—even if some of those dishes are replicas produced with different ingredients, which effectively erase the distinctiveness and reduce the prestige of their consumption. There are several contingent observations to be made about this.

The production, consumption and exigencies of food supply reveal themselves as “colonial” in mode later in the nineteenth century when the local scene of production starts to be emphasised, but the recipes are “nativist” rather than indigenous. What they seem to voice is nostalgia, or memory, or perhaps something less emotive like force of habit, for British culinary traditions; a nostalgia which also reflects a kind of aspiration, as expressed in the colonial catchphrase “to maintain standards,” for certain dishes with class associations. The other powerful factor is the shaping force of location and circumstances. So Broad’s book lists British recipes adapted to local game and fish, but also hints at a kind of wistful longing for cosmopolitanism. Her *New Zealand Exhibition Cookery Book* has, for example, a series of recipes with very similar ingredients which advertise their differences imperially and geographically—rather like the labels of a colonial world tour: Empress Pudding, Company Pudding, Sydney Pudding, Vienna Pudding, Pomona Pudding, and Windsor Castle Pudding.

These names draw attention to a kind of simulation of the circulation of British cooking in glamorous locations, suggesting the circulation of its practitioners, but because the puddings are also solid, starchy and filling, they also express appetite as need: the need for filling quantities of energy-producing carbohydrates, and the need for food to be inexpensive. There is a dialogic tension between a stodgy rice pudding covered in pastry, or a bread-and-butter pudding, and their elegant denominators, respectively, Empress and Queen puddings. Some of the best sources of recipes for cheap filling food were other colonies. Helen Leach makes the point that a number of colonial New Zealand recipes are taken from American or Australian cookbooks; for example, “Brown Betty” (an apple pudding made using stale bread) and

<sup>2</sup> Colonial Goose recipes may still be found—for example, <http://www.bite.co.nz/recipe/5/Colonial-goose/>, where Colonial Goose is explained as “an ironic term adopted by British settlers in New Zealand—and Australia—for a roast boned leg or shoulder of mutton, its cavity filled with the type of stuffing used for poultry.”

some which only exist now in New Zealand and Australia, such as “Ginger Gems,” (small cakes made in a gem iron which reduced cooking time). There are, however, no French names and no expensive ingredients (Leach 43-46).

In her 1982 book *Colonial Fare*, a compendium of colonial recipes and anecdotes about cooking, Jill Brewis includes many recipes which reflect the exigencies of the colonial world; a world which could not afford waste. Many staple ingredients have to be stretched. An example is a recipe for a “Fitless Cock,” which is a mixture of oatmeal, suet, onion and egg, tied in a cloth and “shaped to look like a fowl” before it is boiled (18). The recipes collected by Brewis evoke social occasions, such as funeral biscuits, and a landscape of hard physical work fuelled by cheap and plentiful carbohydrates—boiled rice pudding, bread with potatoes, hasty puddings and plain cake. Opossum Hot Pot, a dish which remained a culinary curiosity though its circumstances can readily be imagined appears next to Ham and Rabbit Mould and Jugged Hare (68). The rabbit invasion of Australia and New Zealand and the opossum invasion of New Zealand provided plentiful raw materials for ecological and culinary intervention. Since the earliest years British settlers had, of course, eaten what came to hand. Sarah Selwyn, wife of Bishop George Selwyn, New Zealand’s prime example of a muscular Christian recorded, in an heroic example of local adaptation, that after the land for St. John’s theological college had been cleared in the 1840s:

. . . horses were in place of oxen [and] a change came over the spirit of our dream—we ate the team! It wasn’t pork but it was a tough enjoyment and I may say lengthy in the performance, 16 bullocks in succession. (Brewis 47)

Like food everywhere, cooking in colonial New Zealand illustrates the complex intersections of bodies, appetites, discourses, circumstances and locations, but it is also and always about the need to eat wherever you are. It is perhaps telling that the first recipes published in New Zealand, under the heading “Useful Recipes” in the *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle* in 1846, were for how to make bread without yeast and what to do with tainted meat—cover it in charcoal and wash with strong vinegar (96). Opportunity, exigency, and appetite ruled, as this line from a recipe for Yachting Soup, written at Paroa Bay in 1820, suggests: “A short, plump fish, thick about the shoulders, is much to be preferred to a long thin one” (Brewis 71).

**Professor Lydia Wevers** has recently retired from her post as Director of the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington. Her published books include *Country of Writing: Travel Writing About New Zealand 1809-1900* (2002), *On Reading* (2004) and *Reading on the Farm: Victorian Fiction and the Colonial World* (2010). She has edited and written many anthologies and papers on literary topics, and been an active member of both the Australasian Victorian Studies Association (AVSA) and the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL). Lydia is currently working on a history of colonial reading, focusing on Dickens and Trollope, which follows on from *Reading on the Farm*.

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