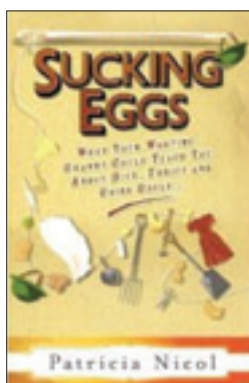


Book reviews

SUCKING EGGS: WHAT YOUR WARTIME GRANNY COULD TEACH YOU ABOUT DIET, THRIFT AND GOING GREEN **PATRICIA NICOL**

Chatto and Windus, 2009
pp 288, £12.99, 9780701182403



THE GARDEN COTTAGE DIARIES **MY YEAR IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY** **FIONA J HOUSTON**

Saraband, 2009
pp 224, £17.95, 9781887354660



I recently watched the brilliant short documentary, 'The Story of Stuff' (www.storyofstuff.com), about how we plunder natural resources, manufacture stuff, distribute it, consume it, then have the problem of waste stuff.

We can feel like victims of the cycle of consumerism with the principle of planned obsolescence governing our producing and buying habits. Yet, if we are going to tackle global warming and

the planet is to survive, we need to change our attitudes towards 'stuff'. Our time is limited but, as Phil Hanlon, professor of public health in Glasgow, says, in this crisis situation, perhaps people will respond as they did in the crisis of the blitz and realise that we are all in it together; a sense of shared purpose and community may emerge.

Patricia Nicol's book, *Sucking Eggs: What Your Wartime Granny Could Teach You About Diet, Thrift and Going Green* takes us back to the days of the blitz. 'Our grannies can show us the way. They wasted almost nothing, they recycled, bought locally, "dug for victory" and grew their own veg'. She quotes Professor Peter Hennessy:

'It wasn't difficult in 1940 to persuade people to make sacrifices because everyone knew there might not be a 1941.'

In 2009, sacrifice is a fairly unpalatable message but the importance of reducing waste, recycling, and enjoying local produce makes economic, as well as green, sense; it's good for local jobs, for local businesses, for the local community and for health. And this book helps to convey that message.

Wartime propaganda was very effective: the book has wonderful illustrations of examples; 'Let your shopping help our shipping', 'Lend a hand on the land', 'Don't take the squander bug when you go shopping'. Waste was detracting for the war effort and unpatriotic. Skills of making and mending were nurtured. The book is full of fascinating insights into the wartime and austerity years and the lessons we can learn from them today.

When Fiona Houston, author of *The Garden Cottage Diaries*, started her year of living as though she were a country woman in the Scottish Borders in the 18th century, it was in response to a friend's challenge to prove her claim that people ate better 200 years ago than they do now. Always a passionate environmentalist, she lived

through the seasons growing, cooking, and feeding herself; wearing home-made clothes; learning lost crafts; and skills and entertaining family and friends.

Her local 21st century sustainability group recently set themselves the challenge of eating from within a radius of 50 miles in order to highlight the wide range of good local produce available and to create more custom for local producers and suppliers. For Fiona Houston, this was a metaphorical piece of cake; she had survived for a year on produce from within a 5-mile radius. Her beautifully illustrated book is a lovely collection of folklore, recipes, gardening wisdom and practical tips. Month by month, she describes the difficulties and the joys of her simple life. Was she glad when the experiment was over? Yes. Had she gained a new perspective on contemporary life? Yes. Can readers learn from sharing this perspective? Definitely.

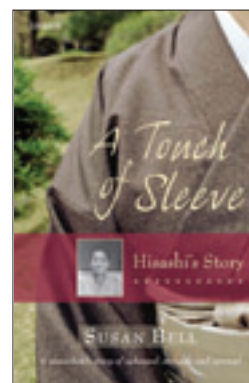
I suggest sharing either or both books with your friends this imminent indulgent season. Both are rich with food for thought.

Lesley Morrison

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp09X473321

A TOUCH OF SLEEVE: **HISHASI'S STORY** **SUSAN BELL**

Longacre Press, Dunedin, 2007
pp 485, £19.50, 9781877361791



One of the joys of general practice is to listen to the amazing stories told by our patients. Sometimes we enjoy them, sometimes we can be quite distressed by them, sometimes we reinterpret them and feed them back in a healing way. Individuals can heal that way, we say.

However most of the time, we like to let sleeping dogs lie, and not to challenge the givens we have all grown up with. As a boy brought up in Scotland during and after World War II, I was given a sense that two nations in particular, the Germans and the Japanese, were responsible for all the real hardships that we suffered. That sense was intensified in a mining village where the local politics was well to the left, and I recall a Sunday afternoon spent at the Regal Cinema in Muirkirk, watching a film in praise of Chairman Mao and his great victory over the Japanese. The definite impression left in this inquiring mind was that the only thing worse than a German was a Japanese person, and the only effect of education was to bury the prejudice deeply.

This deeply buried impression was carried forward into medical practice because, in 1968, when I started in general practice, the stories from two world wars were still able to destroy wellbeing. There were still old men suffering from gassing in Flemish trenches but the silent agony belonged to those who had served in the Far East. I remember the man from Lennoxton who returned from a prison camp in Burma and never worked again. 'He never talks about it, doctor', said his wife. I engaged totally in the collusion that it was all too horrible for words and signed his certificate every 13 weeks for 8 years.

It turns out that the Japanese have also found it difficult to talk about it, but when Hisashi Furuya emigrated from Tokyo to Dunedin, New Zealand, aged 69, in 1989 and got to know and trust the author, he decided that he wanted to put the matter straight, to 'expose his insides for public view.' The result is a beautifully written account of his ancestral background in the samurai and imperial courts, what it

was like to grow up in Japan over the years 1920–1991, and why he decided to emigrate to Dunedin with his sister in old age. For him the meeting with Susan was inevitable and the title comes from his belief that 'When our sleeves touch, it is karma'.

Susan Bell tells Hisashi's story in a beautiful way with precise descriptions such as that of Hisashi's parents wedding feast with its detailed menu and the description of the three separate kimonos which his mother wore as a sign that, 'she was a good wife, the daughter of a rich and famous man'. His sister who died in Dunedin in 1999 has an inscription on her tombstone there which is written in white.

Hisashi's is written in red, to be changed 'when he crosses the river.' Susan sums him up thus:

'He is like a work of origami, the creases and folds of paper similar to the creases and folds of his life. Even the most complicated folds look simple from the outside, but, like him, they hide old flaws and uncover new shapes. Since being in New Zealand he has had time and a clear head to rethink his understanding of what it means to be human, what it means to belong to a culture, and what he has learnt and gained through contact with people whose experiences and values differ from his own.'

This is an amazing and healing story which I recommend to you all.

Campbell Murdoch

DOI:10.3399/bjgp09X473330