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

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

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