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University of Leeds
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The Great Feast

Eileen White

The Great Feast is that given on the installation of George Neville as Archbishop of York in the sixth year of Edward IV,¹ which not only made an impression at the time but also attracted the attention of later generations for different reasons. This study uses the Blanche Leigh and John Preston collections of cookery books and related material, in the Special Collections section of the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds, to examine the occasion and find reactions of earlier writers to the subject against which we can measure our own. It is a reminder that we are never objective in the way we look at, or use, history. The subject of eating, not usually central to the serious study of history which favours politics, may suggest some of the undercurrents of historical events. And when describing food and feasts of the Middle Ages, writers often reveal the preoccupations and attitudes of their own period.

Some people, especially modern *cordon bleu* trained chefs with a French bias, have great difficulty with medieval cooking, mainly because many recipes call for a long list of ingredients to be mixed together:

Where we try to develop the flavor and texture of ingredients to the full, medieval cooks pounded and puréed them out of all recognition, then spiced them in such profusion that the original taste was lost. There were very good reasons for this. Food was often so stale as to be almost rotten; it needed to be pounded and then disguised by strong spices or cheered up with coloring.²

Such assumptions might affect our view of the Great Feast, but have these modern cooks studied the subject carefully? We can be grateful to the Early English Text Society which has made several recipe collections and Books of Manners available.³ These enable us to decipher the strange items in the menus of the Feast and help us to understand the intricacies of dining etiquette: no chicken bones thrown over

the shoulder and no wenches in low-cut blouses; the art of carving was part of the training of the squire; and a certain fastidiousness was necessary in communal dining – the hand that puts the food in the mouth is not the hand that takes it from the common dish.

Several versions of the Feast – its menu, list of ingredients, number of guests – have been published over the centuries and can be found in the Brotherton Library collection. The Feast was chronicled in such detail, and commented on over the centuries, because it was so extravagant. One manuscript recipe collection from the late-fifteenth-century, *A Noble Boke off Cookry*, was transcribed and published in 1882 by Mrs Napier.⁴ Secure in a background of twenty years of Mrs Beeton, Mrs Napier was not won over to the medieval table:

In conclusion, we may observe that, in the matter of cookery as in every other, when "the good old days" come to be examined at all closely, we find no reason to regret that they have passed away for ever. The study may afford amusement and interest, but not a moment's sorrow that barbarous magnificence and coarse profusion may have happily given way to the comfort, simplicity and refinement of modern times.

(p. xiii)

A Noble Boke off Cookry starts with a series of menus served at specific occasions, and then offers some further menus, perhaps intended to inspire the master cook faced with preparing a feast. One identified menu is that served at George Neville's installation:

The ffirst course

| | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Braun with mustard | heron roste |
| ffurmente with venyson | carpet in venison |
| hert poured | pik in ereblad |
| ffessand in brayn | leshe caute rialle |
| Swan rost | ffritur boyse |
| Ganetz | venyson bak |
| Gullez | custad planted |
| capon de haut grece | chewetts riall with a suttellte |

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The second course

| | |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Gilly parti riall | Goodwitts |
| viand rasens | red shankes |
| venison in brakes | yarowe helpes |
| pecock in trapille | knottes |
| cony roste | Oxene |
| roo reversed | Creme in purpull |
| lardes de venison | leshe cipirs |
| pertuches | ffritur napkyne |
| wodcok | tarte in molde |
| plouer | chatowe dyuers riall with a suttellte |

The third course

| | |
|------------------|-----------------------------|
| Bland desere | dotterelles rost |
| dates in comfet | martynets rost |
| neutes vert | Gret birds |
| Bittur rostid | larkes rost |
| Curlew rostid | sparowes |
| fessand rostid | ffreche sturgion |
| Railes rost | lesshe blanche |
| Egret rost | ffritur cuspe |
| Rabettes | quinces bak |
| quailes | rorestis florishid |
| poums vert | chamlettes withe a suttelte |
| Got whelpes rost | |

(pp. 7-8)

Such a combination of dishes in three courses is typical, and we have to forget the relatively modern practice of dividing the sweet and savoury into separate courses. Nor would every guest have every dish set before them; only the most important diner could expect to be given a full choice, to take from as he wished, and he could direct that certain portions be sent to other guests. The least important diners, and certainly the servants, would only have received two or three dishes for each course.

One of the pioneer transcribers of early cookery books was Samuel Pegge,

editor of *The Forme of Cury* in 1780.⁵ He made several observations on the recipes in that particular manuscript, at a time when cookery writers (by now often women) were giving precise directions:

Many of them are so highly seasoned, are such strange and heterogeneous compositions, meer olios and gallimawfreys, that they seem removed as far as possible from the intention of contributing to health [. . .]

I observe further [. . .] that the quantities of things are seldom specified, but are too much left to the taste and judgement of the cook, who, if he should happen to be rash and inconsiderate, or of a bad and undistinguishing taste, was capable of doing much harm to the guests.

(pp. xvi-xvii)

A contemporary of Pegge, the Reverend Richard Warner, published *Antiquitates Culinariae* in 1791, and he included a description of the Great Feast which he took in his turn from Thomas Hearne's 1774 edition of Leland's *Collectanea*⁶ where it is said that the description was taken 'Out of an old Paper Roll'. Now the full extent of the Feast can be appreciated, and it should be noted that this version expands the menu and differs in some details from that in *A Noble Boke*. First comes a list of ingredients, followed by the names of the participants and their seating in the Hall, the chief Chamber, the second Chamber, the great Chamber, the lower Hall and the Gallery. There are separate menus for a main service, another service and a fish service (presumably for the stricter clerics). In addition there is a description of how 'the Baron-bishop within the close of Yorke' should have his food served to him. To give some idea of the scale of catering, the ingredients include 300 quarters of wheat, 104 oxen, 1000 muttons, 304 'Porkes' and 2000 pigs, and thousands of geese, capons, mallards, cranes, chickens and other birds. Baked dishes of pasties, tarts and custards are similarly counted by the thousand. The diners, ranging from the Archbishop, other clerics and nobles to numerous knights and gentry, franklins, yeomen and servants, not forgetting sixty two Cooks and over one hundred broche turners, add up to about 3000 people.

The Great Feast had earlier been cited with either admiration or contempt by those holding opposing attitudes in the Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century. The writers of the Restoration, when revelling in the new age and the end of Puritan restrictions, derided the Commonwealth by looking back to the good times before it.

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William Rabisha finished his 1673 recipe book *The Whole Body of Cookery Dissected* with an Appendix quoting Wynkyn de Worde's instructions for Carving and Serving (later also reproduced in the Early English Text Society's *Babees Book*), and then finished with another extract:

Reader, I have here presented to thee the order of a feast, and a Bill of Fare, which was taken out of the Records of the Tower; I have done it the rather, that thou maist see what liberality and hospitality there was in antient times amongst our Progenitors [. . .] Thus hoping to see liberality flourish amongst us once more, as in old time.

This is 'A great FEAST made by George Nevile [. . .]' and Rabisha gives a list of the amounts of main ingredients used for its preparation, the names of the chief officers who served it, and the seating arrangement. He dates it 1468.⁷

His was not a new discovery: in 1645 a pamphlet had been printed, quoting the same information but for a totally different reason (it being the time of the Commonwealth):

The Great Feast, At the Inthronization of the Reverend Father in God, George Neavill Arch-Bishop of Yorke, Chancellour of England, in the sixt yeere of Edward the fourth, Wherein is Manifested the great Pride and vaine glory of that Prelate.

This eight-page pamphlet, giving the list of ingredients, guests and names of the Officers, has some variant readings from Rabisha ('Swanns, foure hundred' rather than the latter's '0400 Swines', for example), but the information is closer to Warner's version ('Swannes - - - CCCC').⁸

The account of the Great Feast, in all the above sources, reveals the almost regal nature of the event, where nobility, such as the Earl of Warwick in this case, take on the ceremonial positions of serving at the feast. Not only can we see the opulence of the occasion, and the hierarchy of such a feast, but the political implications of this one in particular begin to emerge. These would have to be further examined using sources outside those used here, but the list of guests and description of seating arrangements provoke questions.

Edward IV had achieved the throne with the help of the Neville family, and they expected their reward. The appointment of George Neville as Archbishop of York was

no doubt part of this, and the grandeur of the Feast, rivalling anything the King might have promoted, was a visible symbol of the power of the family, especially in the north of England. The chief guests, seated at seven tables in the main Hall, reflect this. The Archbishop sat in state at the top table with the Bishops of London, Durham and Ely on his right and the Duke of Suffolk and the Earls of Oxford and Worcester on his left. Abbots and Priors of the major northern abbeys, such as St Mary's in York, Fountains, Rievaulx, Durham, Whalley and Selby, were present, together with the Deans of Durham and York and the prebends of York Minster. Lord Montague, Lord Scrope and others shared a table with forty-eight unidentified knights and squires, and elsewhere were seated the Mayors of York and Calais, and all the Aldermen of York. Another table held Judges and lawyers, and the last table had 69 esquires wearing the King's livery.

It was the nature of such formal feasts, especially no doubt when it centred on churchmen, to segregate the women from their husbands, and seated in the separate chief Chamber were the Duchess of Suffolk, the Countesses of Westmorland and Northumberland, four Baronesses and twelve other ladies, together with the Earl of Warwick's two daughters and eighteen gentlewomen. There was only one man in this room, given the most important place – the Duke of Gloucester, Edward IV's brother Richard, then about fourteen. Given his closeness to the King, it may be argued that he was the King's representative at the Feast despite his age, and so it is surprising that he was not seated in the main Hall. Of course, he had the place of state in the second chamber, but he was surrounded by women. Was it considered that, as a youth, he would be happy sitting with Warwick's family? He had been brought up in the Earl's household and was eventually to marry one of the daughters, so perhaps he was there as a family friend. Or was it a subtle snub to Edward, as the Nevilles sat in the Hall with the society that provided them with a power base? After all, Richard had recently left Warwick's family to join Edward in London. The Great Feast was a statement of Neville power, not just a celebration of the enthronement of an Archbishop, and it came at a time when Warwick was becoming discontented with his treatment by Edward. The etiquette and seating of the Great Feast can reveal not only the eating habits of late-medieval society but a much deeper political undercurrent.

More ladies were seated in a second Chamber, and the great Chamber contained two more bishops, two earls and other lords, and fourteen gentlemen of worship, here actually sitting with their gentlewomen. Two sittings were provided, both in the low Hall for gentlemen, franklins and yeomen and in the Gallery for servants of the nobility.

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Depending on one's point of view in the seventeenth century, the whole either adds up to a demonstration of the pride of Archbishop Neville, setting himself against the power of the King, or a demonstration of the liberality and hospitality expected of great noblemen. A study of the Great Feast could be the starting-point for an examination of the society and politics of its period, but the resources of the Brotherton Library cookery collection suggest it can also lead into an investigation of the organization of great households to see how such an event could be made possible. The Society of Antiquities produced a useful source book in 1790, *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations*.⁹ From this we learn of the officers who kept the estate in a great hall: the Master and Ushers, officers of the Ewery and Napery, the sewers, carvers and cupbearers. At the Great Feast, many of these positions were held by lords and knights. Providing the food were the officers of the Kitchen, Acaterly, Butchery, Poultry, Spicery, Sawcery, Bakehouse, Wafery and Confectionary. The Pantry received bread from the Bakehouse and had to account for its use, and the Larder kept a check on the food and stored the remains. The office of Butlery looked after the ale and that of the Cellar kept the wine.

The Household Ordinances of the Duke of Clarence in 1469 describe the daily meeting of those responsible for providing the food:

It is ordeigned that the Steward, the Tresorer, the Countroller, the clerke of kichyn, the marshalle, the ussher, pantrers, butlers, cookes, lardeners, catourers, and suche other officers, at twoe of the clocke at aftyrnoone, assemble in the halle, and there ordeigne the fare of the seide Duke and his household, for the souper the same nighte, and the next day's dynner.

(A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations, p. 94)

Perhaps such a meeting on a larger scale convened to plan the Archbishop's Great Feast, with representatives of the Earl of Warwick, who acted as Steward, and the Earl of Northumberland, who was Treasurer. Cooks from several Neville and related households could have been recruited, and perhaps also from the local abbeys, for by this time monasteries employed professional lay cooks.¹⁰ It may have been at such gatherings that the manuscript recipe collections were employed, not in the kitchen itself, and they may have been kept by the Steward or Clerk of the Kitchen. The manuscripts are often carefully written, with rubricated headings, and are not covered in grease and gravy splashes, nor with the working annotations of cooks. In any case, it cannot be assumed that Master Cooks were literate, as opposed to the Clerk of the

Kitchen whose job it was to count all the ingredients in and count them out in their transformed state. Cooks were trained practically through a long apprenticeship, and would know the basics. There was no need for manuscripts to give instructions on how to roast an ox, but rather to record and suggest the more unusual or strange mixtures that would supplement the Cooks' own experience. Later writers such as Samuel Pegge, who wondered where the roast beef of old England had gone to, and the modern *cordon bleu* chefs who scoff at the endless diet of puréed and overspiced food, are not necessarily looking at the recipe manuscripts in the context of the working kitchen of a large medieval household. The recipes deliberately give us a large variety of more complicated fare, ideas for fancy dishes to make an impression at a feast rather than examples of everyday food well known to the Cook. It may be that the recipes do not give us a balanced picture of medieval food. On the other hand several of the dishes have survived in regional cookery to this day: mince pies (originally including meat), haggis and Yorkshire curd tart are only a few examples. It is also notable that these recipes are for the Kitchen; there are no instructions for making bread, pastry or wafers, which would have come under separate offices in the medieval household.

The large aristocratic households were catering for large numbers, and certainly in a royal household there was a separate kitchen preparing food for the King's own consumption. The cooks preparing meals for the household in general would not think it strange to be instructed to 'tak an hundred onyons oper an half', or to look for 5lb of dates at a time.¹¹ In considering these quantities, it is not possible to say that medieval food was overspiced, either because of taste or to hide the use of tainted meat. A large household would soon consume an ox without leaving anything to go bad, and the cost of spices, which had to be measured out from the Office of Spicery, would prohibit too lavish a use.¹² Even Archbishop Neville and the whole of his relations would have been hard pressed to provide the ingredients to overspice 104 oxen, 2000 pigs and 4000 venison pasties.

The Great Feast impressed its contemporaries, being recorded in different versions, and it continued to impress in succeeding centuries. The credibility of assembling the huge number of ingredients, and serving the prepared food to so many guests, needs to be further examined. The records of the Feast, whether reported in *A Noble Boke off Cookry* or published by Warner, do not refer to any mishaps, and if it was a succesful culinary event it would have been a triumph of skill and organization. Even if numbers have been exaggerated, preparation would have needed the combined expertise of kitchen staff from several establishments. Perhaps some food was brought in ready-cooked from elsewhere, and army or travelling household caterers would be used to setting up a field kitchen, Illustrations of such open-air cooking using huge

iron pots on pulleys can be found in the illustrations accompanying Scappi's book on Pope Pius V's kitchen in 1570.¹³

The cookery books in the Brotherton Library's Special Collections can be used to provide recipes for many of the dishes served, and explain the practicalities behind an important political event. They also provide an insight into changing attitudes towards food and feasting over the centuries, and as such can be a valid source for research.

Feasting by Archbishops of York continued to be notorious:

An Italian having a sute here in Englande to the Archbushope of Yorke that then was, and commynge to Yorke when one of the prebendaries there, brake his breade, as they terme it, and there upon made a solemne longe diner the whiche perhaps began at eleven, and continued well nigh till fower in the afternone, at the whiche diner this bishoppe was. It fortunated that as they were sette the Italian knockt at the gate, unto whom the porter, perceiving his errand, answered, that my lord bishupe was at diner. The Italian departed, and returned betweene twelve and one: the porter answered, they were yet at diner. He came againe at twoo of the clocke, the porter told hym they had not half dined. He came at three a'clocke, unto whom the porter in a heate, answered never a worde, but churlishly did shutte the gates upon him. Wherupon, others told the Italian, that ther was no speaking with my lord almoste all that daie, for the solemn diner sake, The gentleman Italian, wonderyng muche at such a long sittinge, and greatly greved because he could not then speak with the Archbyshoppes grace, departed straight towards London, and leavying the dispatche of his matters with a dere friend of his, toke his journey towards Italie. Three yeares after, it happened that an Englishman came to Rome, with whom this Italian by chance falling acquainted, asked him if he knew the Archbishoppe of York? the Englishman said, he knew him right welle. 'I pray you tell me', quoth the Italian, 'hath that archbishoppe yet dined?'¹⁴

NOTES

¹ 4 March 1465/6 to 3 March 1466/7.

² Anne Willan, *Great Cooks and Their Recipes From Taillevent to Escoffier* (London, Pavilion Books, 1992), p. 9.

³ *The Babees Book*, ed. by Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS, os 32 (London: Trübner, 1868); *Two Fifteenth-Century Cookery-Books*, ed. by Thomas Austin, EETS, os 91 (London: Trübner, 1888); *Curye on Inglysch*, ed. by Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, EETS, ss 8 (London: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁴ *A Noble Boke off Cookry ffor a Prynce Houssolde*, ed. by Mrs Alexander Napier (London: Elliot Stock, 1882).

⁵ *The Forme of Cury, A Roll of Ancient English Cookery*, ed. by Samuel Pegge (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1780).

⁶ *Antiquitates Culinaria or Curious Tracts relating to the Culinary affairs of the Old English*, ed. by the Rev. Richard Warner (London, 1791), pp. 93-106. This version has been used as the main source for summarizing the information. A pencil note on p. 9 of the copy in the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, has given the year as 1467. *Johannis Lelandi Antiquarii De Rebus Britannicis Collectanea*, ed. by Thomas Hearne, 6 vols (London, 1774), VI, 2-14.

⁷ William Rabisha, *The Whole Body of Cookery Dissected* (London, 1673). The final pages are unnumbered.

⁸ A copy of this pamphlet is in the Blanche Leigh collection in Special Collections, Brotherton Library, reference K-3. It is outside the scope of this article to compare the variant readings of the transcripts, or to locate the original manuscripts.

⁹ *A Collection of Ordinances and Regulations for the Government of the Royal Household, made in divers Reigns: From King Edward III to King William and Queen Mary. Also Receipts in Ancient Cookery* (London: The Society of Antiquaries, 1790).

¹⁰ Bridget Ann Henisch, *Fast and Feast* (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), pp. 72-73.

¹¹ *Diuersa Seruicia*, number 88, 'For to make a porrey chapeleyn', *Curye on Inglysch*, p. 79; and 'Viande Burton for xl Mess', in 'Receipts in Ancient Cookery', *A Collection of Ordinances*, p. 456.

¹² For further comment on the use of spices, see Terence Scully, *The Art of Cookery in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995), pp. 83-86.

¹³ *Opera di M. Bartolomeo Scappi* (Venice, 1570).

¹⁴ Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorike* (London, 1553), fol. 78, 679a, quoted by Mrs Napier, pp. 131-32.