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Foraging

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Foraging

A useful starting point for any discussion of the subject is the distinction between foraging, agriculture and hunting. At a common-sense level such a separation is easy. Foragers gather wild food, while agriculture – by contrast – involves its cultivation. Hunting may be specifically understood as the killing of wild animals. Yet a sustained consideration of the fault-lines between these practices reveals not sharp differentiation but zones of evident overlap. In his substantial contribution to the literature on the topic, *Food For Free* (orig. 1972), Richard Mabey describes how, through their selection of choice specimens of wild plants and subsequent disposal of their seeds around their settlements, our Neolithic ancestors may be said to have commenced the process of agriculture: ‘a sort of automatic selection would have taken place, with crops of the more fruitful plants growing naturally near habitation’. (Mabey, 2004. 9) Relatedly, agricultural practices have clearly contributed to the forager’s larder in contemporary settings where the offspring or relics of once-cultivated plants provide a harvest in places either adjacent to zones of cultivation or which have been abandoned as sites of production. This distinction has long been understood. Writing in 1862 Henry David Thoreau celebrated those apple trees in the U.S.A. that, not seeded by man, had established themselves in wild settings, ‘in the midst of pines, birches, maples, and oaks’. Nonetheless, he is at pains to stress that these trees, ancestors of European stock brought by settlers, are not native; ‘our wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock’¹. In this context it may be fruitful to think of the ‘wild’ aspect of ‘wild food’ in terms of a double meaning - encompassing both the inherently wild and that which has ‘run wild’. We will also pick up later on that desire, so beautifully expressed by Thoreau, to stray into the woods.

The endeavour to strike firm and separate definitions of foraging and hunting has equivalent complications, and not merely in the nomenclatural sense that a gatherer of wild fungi might be styled a ‘mushroom hunter’. Rather, the distinction between the forager as gatherer of wild plants and the hunter as one who pursues wild animals is itself fraught. Mabey, again, provides an apposite example of how these boundaries prove porous; his rationale for including shellfish in *Food for Free* being that ‘from a picker’s eye view, they are more like plants than animals. They stay more or less in one place, and are gathered, not caught.’ (14)² That his categorization is entirely risible - if considered in terms of biological classification/taxonomy - is beside the point. Neither is the similarity of Mabey’s wobbly collocation to other, historical and contemporary, classificatory ruses especially problematic for the would-be forager. Think, for example, of the gambits to circumvent medieval sumptuary laws (that whales, seals and barnacle geese could all be considered ‘fish’) or some of the more convoluted manoeuvres for keeping kosher. Whilst both the latter reflect pragmatic solutions to accessing certain foods whilst simultaneously adhering to the letter (if not the spirit) of articles of faith, the parameters of foraging are not established in such a canonical, expressly prohibitive, fashion, though they may well be considered in terms of ethical considerations. Foragers are not, for example, expected to be vegetarians. Nor indeed does any

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/1862nov/186211thoreau2.htm>

² The contemporary consumption of road-kill would be another example of how animal-based foodstuffs might be encompassed in a roster of foraging practices.

entity exist to establish and police expectations, though the literature on foraging certainly offers 'good practice' guidelines focused on sustainability and safety. Instead, Mabey's inclusive definition of the forager's domain reflects an understanding of foraging not existing as *a priori* principles, but first and foremost as a human *practice* which may be charted.

Considered from an anthropological perspective, foraging may be seen as an ancient activity that has shaped our evolution. It may reasonably be argued that we are all the descendants of competent foragers, in that 'individuals with more efficient resource procurement or foraging strategies will have a reproductive advantage over individuals with less.' (Ingold, 2000. 28) However, foraging is now almost entirely supplanted (in terms of providing nourishment) by organised agricultural – and indeed industrial – practices for producing food. It may persist in a few of the remoter regions of the world as a significant contributor to the daily diet, frequently alongside hunting and primitive agriculture, but has otherwise been eclipsed. Given that the examination of those few pre-modern societies whose lifestyles have largely resisted external forces and 'development' lies outside the scope of the present study, what remains is to consider the place of foraging in a world that may be said to have moved on. Broadly speaking, this may be divided into two categories: firstly, times and places where foraging has *re*-appeared of necessity; and secondly, the practice of foraging as a pastime and cultural choice in societies where purchasable food is abundant, easily accessible and frequently cheap. Necessity, as seems proper, will be addressed first.

In the United Kingdom volumes such as *They Can't Ration These* (1940) and *Hedgerow Harvest* (1943) appeared in the context of the Second World War and food rationing. After many decades of the national diet moving away from home-produced goods (both in the sense of the individually domestic and the national) and towards an increasing reliance on foodstuffs sourced from around the Empire, a U-boat blockade and the interruption of global trade meant that Britain would have to return to habits of self-sufficiency. In contemporary terms, it was a crisis of food security. Addressed in large part by increasing the area of land under cultivation and by centrally-controlled measures to ensure the production of only the most necessary foodstuffs for human nourishment and their equitable distribution, an additional means by which the Government sought to increase access to food involved encouraging a return to foraging. Recipe suggestions included dishes that substituted then-unavailable ingredients for ones that could be found locally, for example rose hip marmalade. *Hedgerow Harvest* asserts that 'the ruby-red seed of the rose makes an excellent marmalade'³. It may or not have approximated to orange marmalade (fresh oranges only occasionally came through from America and were restricted to children) but could scarcely have been less popular than some of the manufactured 'substitute' foods, notably the ominous-sounding National Margarine. Rose hip marmalade, and equivalent relishes and side-dishes, also represent a significant strand of continuity through to contemporary foraging practices in that even *in extremis* they rarely constituted the primary elements of sustenance (i.e. of calories consumed) but furnished instead a marginal, though nonetheless welcome, contribution to the diet. Whilst most present-day foragers looking to the hedgerows – for blackberries, or sloes for sloe gin – no longer do so because there is no alternative

³ <http://www.recipespastandpresent.org.uk/wartime/?cat=92>

source⁴, they still engage in a practice that seasons, varies and enlivens their overall gustatory experience.

Elio Vittorini's semi-autobiographical novel *Conversations in Sicily* includes a poignant sequence in which a mother and her adult son recall their circumstances - and, relatedly, how they ate - in his childhood, including the experience of hunger. "But we were well-off, in our house!" protests the son. "Yes," replies the mother. "Your father got paid at the end of every month, and so for ten days we were well-off [...] But when the first ten days were up [...] We ate snails." (Vittorini, 2003. 56) For some poor Sicilians in the first half of the Twentieth Century, foraging existed as a vital adjunct to buying and growing one's own food. Foodstuffs such as snails and wild chicory were gathered, not as part of a quaint ritual or desire to connect with the foods of the vernacular landscape, but because the alternative was going hungry. A related account of wild food occupying a more-than-marginal role in the family diet is offered by Joe Bageant in *Rainbow Pie*, his angry lament for America's white rural underclass. Bageant describes how his 'mountain tribe, meat hunters for two-and-a-half centuries in these hills, are truly people of the deer.' (Bageant, 2010. 297) For Europeans, of course, generally occupying far more densely-populated spaces, and with privately-owned hunting grounds jealously guarded and invariably the preserve of a wealthy elite, the notion of populist deer-hunting is nearly inconceivable. It remains a potent cultural trope in the U.S.A., however, albeit that it is probably more usually practiced as leisure and as masculine ritual, rather than as a significant and necessary contributor to the diet.(ref?)

Dorothy Hartley's *Food In England*, originally published in 1954, offers a magisterial survey of the nation's culinary practices, bringing together an extraordinary range of sources and references. Her account of times of food shortages in Medieval England, and of the desperate foraging practices they occasioned, remain compelling:

'So comes the terrible time when berries are gathered for food and wild roots of the pig-nut and acorn are ground to make a miserable ash cake. Fish from the rivers, wild birds killed with sling stones, snakes, shellfish, braxy mutton – anything is food that will fill the belly.' (Hartley, 2006. 231)

Her list is instructive. The fundamental difficulty for the forager of finding and preparing an acceptable form of carbohydrates is especially pointed. Poor ingredients - 'wild roots of the pig nut and acorn' - are laboriously transformed into an explicitly disappointing product, 'the miserable ash cake'. By contrast, the berries gathered for food and the fish from the rivers sound positively Arcadian, though the fact of their being only infrequently present or available, owing to seasonality or the difficulty of catching them, reminds us that they cannot always be relied upon. The wild birds killed with slingshots are less likely to be plump game than blackbirds and thrushes; rather slender pickings. (Thrushes and similarly-sized birds are the principal quarry of one of literature's most arrestingly-rendered foragers, the beautiful half-wild Manon of Marcel Pagnol's *Manon of the Springs*.) Shellfish should more accurately conjure a picture of chewy limpets knocked from the rocks than, say, a choice lobster, and the reference to snakes and braxy (i.e. diseased) mutton reminds us that foraging could be less about the discovery of pristine natural foodstuffs and rather

⁴ Though, tragically, at the time of writing thousands of besieged and starving Syrians have been reduced to the consumption of grass and pets.

more an affair of descending to foods that are despised, discarded and sometimes outright dangerous.

Equally, Hartley's awareness of how tough rural reality could be in no way occludes her capacity to enjoy the beauty of the natural world and its edible wild products. Her often-quoted description of discovering the Chanterelle mushroom is a miniature master-class in sensory evocation and poetic comparison at the same time as providing the reader with a solid guide to accurate identification:

'You find them, suddenly, in the autumn woods, sometimes clustered so close they look like a torn golden shawl dropped down amongst the dead leaves and sticks. They are all the same clear, egg-yolk yellow, the stem coming up straight, and springing and spreading stiff as a tiny fountain spurting gold. The top surface is damp and glossy yellow; the underside crinkly matt yellow; and they smell faintly of apricots.' (Hartley, 2006. 301)

Her paeon to the Chanterelle makes a fine transition to our analysis of foraging conducted, not out of necessity, but for other reasons. A host of motivations may underlie the choice to forage, including, but not limited to: the desire to obtain some foods from outwith the industrial food complex (as charted in Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*); a wish to connect with nature and seasonality, along the lines of Thoreau's straying into the woods; participation in historic, local (sometimes resurrected) food-gathering rituals that may have a communal dimension; the enthusiasm to find rare or otherwise unobtainable ingredients; and even the career choice, as, for example, in the case of the professional mushroom or truffle hunter supplying upscale restaurants. The latter case reminds us that not all foraged food is necessarily consumed by foragers and that a single type of foraged food may be the target of both amateur and professional foragers. For example, Mary Hufford's essay on morel-gathering in Appalachia centres on the practice as a community-based affair where the foodstuff is perceived as a local patrimony, part of the 'resources of the commons' (Hufford, 2006. 49) whereas Gary Alan Fine's *Morel Tales* also addresses the business of those who look to sell what they find.

Perhaps one of the most resonant accounts, certainly one of the most mouth-watering, is Alix Kates Shulman's memoir of living, and foraging, out of a coastal shack in Maine over successive summers, *Drinking the Rain*. A self-taught forager – guided by Euell Gibbons' *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* – her food choices combine the ethical thinker's desire to *know* about what she's eating with the gourmet's delight in savouring it. Such evocative names and ingredients as 'juniper, bayberry, Irish moss', 'goosefoot "strawberries" and a fistful of yellow charlock blossoms' (Shulman, 1995. 133) tantalise us with their unfamiliarity – inevitably prompting the thought that the well-informed forager has access to a wider range of taste experiences. Unfamiliarity also entails risk, however, as many of the field guides expressly state. Jon Krakauer's non-fiction book *Into The Wild* describes – and to a certain extent surmises – the experiences of Christopher McCandless who, after dropping out of college, began to travel the USA, ending up in Alaska, where his body was eventually found. It is conjectured, on the basis of a final diary entry, that he died of poisoning from the plants he had foraged and stored. Krakauer postulates that McCandless was influenced by some of America's classic writing on wilderness and the human experience, notably Thoreau and Jack London. It is also known that he had purchased a guide to the edible plants of Alaska. In the new preface to *Food For Free* Mabey specifically decries 'playing at survival', calling it 'the unacceptable face of foraging' (2003. 7). Whilst 'playing' would be a harsh indictment of McCandless' motivations and tragic end,

there may be observed a contemporary dimension of foraging as entertainment; gruesome foods forced down as a test of mettle and a thrill for squeamish onlookers. For many, popular television programmes in which presenters endure challenging landscapes and obtain nourishment from off-putting sources are likely to constitute their main –albeit mediated – exposure to foraging practices. TV adventurer Bear Grylls’ book *Extreme Foods: What to Eat When Your Life Depends on it*, with its Witchetty grubs and scorpions, represents the literary manifestation of this on-screen phenomenon, the author’s very name fabulously suggestive of culinary machismo.

A recurring property of much of the literature on foraging is its intended function as a practical guide. Indeed many volumes on foraging are expressly sized as portable texts to accompany and assist foraging expeditions. Drawings and photographs, frequently in colour, accompany descriptions of plants and mushrooms, alongside accounts of the best times and places to find them. Accurate *identification* is the over-arching aim, as with equivalent literature on, say, bird-watching. Equally, since identification is, for the forager, a precursor to ingestion, the stakes are somewhat higher. This is especially the case where visual similarities exist between two organisms, one edible and the other not, as, for example, between the Horse Mushroom (*agaricus arvensis*) and the poisonous Yellow-Staining Mushroom (*agaricus xanthodermus*). The latter displays a yellowish hue when bruised or cut. Safety advice in such texts also extends beyond identification, for example the oft-repeated advice to pickers of watercress to avoid picking from stagnant or slow-moving water, to cut near the top, and (generally) to cook the resulting harvest. All these measures work to protect against the liver fluke parasite (*Fasciola hepatica*).

Just as there is an identifiable literature of foraging, it may also be observed that foraging and foraged foods may be spotted, plucked, and relished amidst the wider field of literature. A frequently-foraged food with a notable literary mention is wild garlic. With a heady, garlicky, smell the plant was traditionally reviled by dairymen for its capacity, even in small amounts, to infuse the flavour of milk when consumed by cows. Chapter twenty two of Hardy’s *Tess of The D’Urbervilles* begins with dismay at Tess’s workplace when a letter of complaint states that ‘the butter had a twang’ (Hardy, 1985. 195). Tess and her colleagues scour the meadow, armed with small knives, and eventually find and excise no more than half-a-dozen shoots. Not a great deal, but enough to do harm, and – of course – a symbol within the wider narrative of a lurking taint, a concealed danger. For the forager however wild garlic is a welcome arrival. Cut in substantial quantities, carefully rinsed, it can be cooked like spinach in a large pot with butter, salt, and pepper. One of Britain’s more unusual examples of a foraged food was eringo, a candied sweetmeat made from the root of Sea Holly (*Eryngium maritimum*). Celebrated in mediaeval times for its supposed aphrodisiac properties, it was preserved in sugar and orange-flower water, selling in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries for more than four shillings a pound (Gordon. 2012: 90). With a welter of supposed culinary-medicinal uses, spanning the already-mentioned aphrodisiac, through aromatic, diaphoretic, diuretic, expectorant, stimulant, and tonic⁵, it is mentioned in a decidedly lusty context in Shakespeare’s *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in which a pre-tryst Falstaff proclaims “let it... snow eringo; let there come a tempest of provocation” (Act 5, Scene 5 – p506). Elsewhere, Shakespeare references another foraged coastal delicacy the gathering of which he describes in *King Lear* as a perilous cliff-face occupation: “Half-way down hangs one that gathers samphire; dreadful trade!”

⁵ <http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Eryngium+maritimum>

(Act 4, Scene 4 – p966)⁶. Charles Nicholls argues that Shakespeare’s familiarity with plants and herbs was considerable, ‘a countryman’s knowledge’, and notes the likelihood that he lived very near a physic garden in the years he lodged on London’s Silver Street. (Nicholls, 2008. 62) Shakespeare’s knowledge of plants, and of their uses, makes a fitting end to this piece, an excerpt from *King Lear* suggesting an analogy of how botanical knowledge and plant names may provide a key or password – for the forager, to an expanded range of food-ways; for the character within the play, to the trust of the ailing King. The choice of plant is, as is invariably the case with Shakespeare, wholly suitable, a traditional remedy for mental disorders of the type that afflict Lear.

KING LEAR

Give the word.

EDGAR

Sweet Marjoram.

KING LEAR

Pass.

(Act 4, scene 5 – p967)

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Fearnley-Whittingstall, Hugh. (1997) *A Cook on the Wild Side: The Indispensable Guide to Collecting and Cooking Wild Food*. London: Boxtree

Fine, Gary Alan. (1998) *Morel Tales: The Culture of Mushrooming*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁶ The coast remains a potentially dangerous place for the food-gatherer, as evidenced by the 2004 tragedy at Morecombe Bay in which at least 21 cockle-pickers - illegal immigrants from China, criminally ill-prepared by their gang-master - were cut off by the incoming tide and drowned.

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