

Review Essay

You Are What You Don't Eat

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Tristram Stuart. *The Bloodless Revolution: Radical Vegetarians and the Discovery of India* (London: HarperCollins, 2006) Pp. 628. 42 ills.

Tristram Stuart. *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times* (New York: Norton, 2007) Pp. 628. 42 ills.



Nothing could be more timely in today's world of concerns over healthful diets, meat-induced diseases, cultural and religious taboos, or the ecology in general than Tristram Stuart's richly documented and fascinating *Bloodless Revolution* (henceforth *BR*). Those of us familiar with the surge of interest in meatless diets during the Enlightenment and with the scholarly works it generated will be surprised by the amount of new materials Stuart brings to light and valorizes. Added to this is a style at once subtle and smooth, enhanced by forty-two color plates and thirty-six integrated illustrations. An American edition, close on the heels of the British one (see above), attests to the book's impact. Its two editions are identical, except for the subtitles. The first edition's subtitle better fits the book's main thrust, since Stuart is much concerned with radicalism, and events posterior to 1850 are given short shrift. We are, however, forcefully reminded in an illustrated epilogue that Gandhi and Hitler (with high-ranking Nazis in tow) had one characteristic in common: they were both vegetarians.

The author is a journalist by trade and a globe-trotter by inclination, yet

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his *BR*, with its sixty-five pages of bibliography, detailed index, and abundant notes, testifies to his being an impeccable scholarly author as well. The book contains twenty-seven chapters grouped into three parts (“Grass Roots,” “Meatless Medicine,” “Romantic Dinners”) roughly corresponding to the gestation, flowering, and spread of vegetarianism. Individual chapters tend to center on specific persons, providing what amounts to a series of case studies in this scrutiny of a multifaceted phenomenon. In spite of sallies here and there, the major part of *BR* covers Britain’s long eighteenth century, although several chapters containing some of the book’s least familiar events and players take us beyond the waters, mainly to France, during the same period.

Stuart’s introduction is not only synoptic, it also interconnects the component parts of his text by underlining the forces that molded the nature and function of vegetarianism early on. While we are told its impulse in Europe can be traced to increased contacts with India and its Brahmin doctrine of nonviolence (*ahimsa*), along with Pythagorean metempsychosis, the exegesis of these two doctrines varied according to time and circumstance, and swung from the spiritual and ethical to the utilitarian, at times reflecting the changing beliefs or tactics of a single individual. François Bernier, a follower of the French seventeenth-century Epicurean philosopher Pierre Gassendi, is a case in point, perhaps because he was a doctor who had spent time in India. He was able to transcend his own cultural and religious views by rationalizing the meat-eating taboo in terms of social justice: beef, if eaten, would be consumed only by the rich and would deprive agriculture of labor that benefits all of society.

The appearance of the term *vegetarian* coincided with the founding of the Vegetarian Society (1847), well into the nineteenth century. This tardy labeling arguably accounts for the many-headed characteristics of a pre-consolidation period. Woven into the fabric of Stuart’s narrative are strands that at times seem incompatible, are rational or based on zealotry, nonviolent or disruptive. These different strands can be justified on the basis of animal rights, religious beliefs and biblical interpretations, social justice and welfare, conformity, oppositional politics, yearnings for Eden, and, above all, so-called “meatless medicine.” This last category, resulting from the Enlightenment’s scientific bent and the importance attributed to diet and hygiene in contemporary medicine coupled with the first stirrings of public health, is vast. It is further enhanced by the ongoing, highly articulate debate on whether man was originally carnivore, herbivore, or omnivore. The medical area has been considerably researched on the British end (e.g., the work of Anita Guerrini), but Stuart, while thoroughly covering the territory, expands it by dint of anecdotes, such as revealing closet vegetarians in befeater country, dwelling on figures less celebrated than George Cheyne—for instance, John Evelyn, contributor,

inter alia, to culinary literature with his well-known 1699 *Acetaria: A Discourse of Sallets*—and, especially, taking the reader across the Channel. Chapter 17 deals with the Florentine physician Antonio Cocchi’s adventuresome and cosmopolitan life (1695–1758) and describes how, in an era of maritime explorations, this reputed doctor touted a “Pythagorean” (i.e., meatless) diet as a cure for scurvy. Stuart convincingly argues that Cocchi rather than James Lind was the true discoverer of the prime alimentary culprit behind scurvy. Turning to France, Stuart shifts his gaze to “Philippe Hecquet’s Catholic Fast Food” in chapter 12. Quite apart from giving this pious Jansenist doctor (1661–1737) the attention he deserves as medical reformer, Stuart provides us with a striking illustration, backed by detailed analysis, of how philosophy, theology, and science conflate to herald a form of “meatless medicine” of considerable impact, transcending national boundaries and those of religious doctrine.¹

BR’s content is so far-reaching and its cast of characters so large that a reviewer is necessarily selective. In this case, I have chosen to bypass important chapters on figures likely better-known to *Eighteenth-Century Life*’s readers, such as Thomas Tryon and George Cheyne. I have also omitted developments on persons closely linked to Romanticism (e.g., Shelley). These sections are, needless to say, as excellent as the rest.

Notes

1. By championing mechanical as opposed to prevalent chemical explanations in the practice of medicine, Phillippe Hecquet was able to rally contemporary iatromechanical theories in defense of vegetarianism.

