

Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery Oral History Project

Interview with Andrew Dalby

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A = Andrew Dalby

I= Mairtin MacConlomaire



Beginning of Interview

I

When did you first come to the Oxford Symposium and how did that happen?

A

It was 1990 and I was brought into food history by my own interests but I was encouraged very early on by Alan Davidson. I was doing research in ancient Greek food history and I was thinking of doing a Ph.D. I did, in fact, begin to do that at that time as a mature student. I submitted an article, the kind of topic I wanted to work on, to PPC (Petits Propos Culinaires). I came across PPC because it was in the Warburg Institute Library in the section banquets. A very nicely classified library that is! Having looked at PPC and thinking that could just be the journal to submit the article I wanted to submit. I did and they took it. It was Alan Davidson who was the editor and eventually through that and through contact with Alan I came to the Oxford Symposium. My first year at the Oxford Symposium I was invited to give a plenary though that is not quite as big a thing as a plenary is now. I just happened to be speaking to everybody on Sunday morning before people split up into parallel sessions. Since nobody arrived very early on Sunday morning the whole thing ran late and I was speaking fairly fast no doubt. But still that seemed to go ok. I seemed to enjoy myself pretty much all through the weekend and wanted to come back and meet some of those same people again and do the same thing next year.

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Do you remember what the theme was? That was 1990 you said?

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It was 1990 and it was Bread...Staple Foods and I submitted a translation of part of a section from Athenaeus, the Greek source on staple foods, on cereals. Then being invited to give a plenary I changed that a bit and gave something a bit more general. That was the topic that got me into it, one of the concrete subjects of the symposium.

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And at that stage, 1990, it was in St. Antony's, were there around 100 or so people at it?

A

About that, I don't remember.

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It had gotten bigger than it had been but had not gotten massive by then.

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Yes, it had already been going for ten years and that time, of course, I met some of the people who had been there from the very beginning. Alan himself I just about knew at that time. Some others I can think of ...the Mars's (Gerald and Valerie Mars). They have not been for a little while now but I still stay with them whenever I come to London for any reason.

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Gerald and Valerie isn't it?

A

Yes. And so yes, it was growing at that stage but it was still a pretty informal thing. Well, it always has been a pretty informal thing I suppose! It remained at St. Antony's for at least ten or fifteen years after that.

I

The interesting thing about St. Antony's, I suppose, was the pot luck lunches and things like that.

A

Yes, that was really good. It is a pity that that had to be given up but I suppose the whole thing grew a little too big to do that and the sponsored meals that we have now, well those are pretty great in their way.

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Nothing wrong with them either. So let's bring it back a little bit and tell me where did you grow up and were there many in the family and how did you get to where you are at now?

A

I was born in Liverpool, my mother and father were both teachers and my father got a job at the Bristol College of Commerce when I was about three. So at that stage we moved from Lancashire down to Bristol so Bristol is where I grew up. I really don't know Lancashire at all. For about ten years we lived in Bristol and I went to school in Bristol. Then my mother got a job about ten miles out of Bristol at a village school. She was the one teacher, the head teacher and we went to live there because a house came with it. From that time on I was living out in the country in Gloucestershire, - Dirham.

I

And was your father a primary school teacher as well?

A

He started as a primary teacher. In fact, that is how they met because he was a Yorkshire man. He went to Leeds Training College. I forget the name of it. My mother, although she was from Lancashire, went to it and happened to be there the same year and that's how they met. So they both trained as Junior School teachers but my father moved onto college teaching. He was an economics lecturer.

I

And were there many in the family?

A

Just me and my sister. In fact, it seemed like a small family because all the rest of the extended family was up in the north. Yorkshire on the one side, Lancashire on the other. Nobody else down south. You did not travel that much in those days so we didn't see the cousins and so on much at that time. But living in a city, Bristol, it is a nice city to grow up in.

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And where did you go to College and how did you get interested in what you are interested in?

A

That took quite a long time. I was at Bristol Grammar School. I got a place at Cambridge so I was an undergraduate at St. John's Cambridge. I became a librarian after that. I studied librarianship in London. I married the year I became a librarianship student so my wife, Maureen, was making the money for both of us that year. So that was in London and then I went back to Cambridge to a permanent job in the University Library. I stayed at the library from 1971 to 1984. At that stage, there was still no food in this...sorry about that! At that stage, I said to myself, like many of my colleagues I could stay in this library all my life until the day I retire. The fellow I worked for, my immediate head, he had started to work in the library at the age of fifteen and retired at the age of sixty-seven, in the same department what's more. But I did not want to do that. So I moved to London to have more challenge. Administrative challenge was what I wanted at that time but less intellectual challenge and that was when I began to look round for a subject that I could begin to handle to do some research on. Looking seriously, I found a Greek text, because I had studied classics at university. It was a Greek text that I wanted to read and found fascinating, much more than I could have guessed and that's Atheneaus the Deipnosophists and that pointed me towards food, food history let's say. But travel, travel also pointed me towards food. So an academic interest came together with a sort of hedonistic interest.

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Nothing wrong with that! And from the subject of food, growing up what were your food memories? Your mother was a working mother so how was the food at home? What influence did that have upon you?

A

You are right. She was a working mother so that meant she was an early enthusiast for easily prepared food, for tinned and frozen food. There was a good variety of food experiences I think including those, and I was thinking about this from the point of view of offal just an hour or so ago. Liver, kidneys, marrow, things that I loved and at the same time one that I was deprived of because my father loved Tripe and my mother cooked it for him but I never got a taste of that! I don't think she did either so it took me a little longer to decide whether I liked tripe or not. But yes, they were good experiences. We went to restaurants occasionally, not often, you didn't then really I don't think. We travelled, my father liked to travel abroad. They had long holidays being teachers. We had

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two very long summer holidays in France, in Nice and that's when I got to like using foreign languages. I mean I was about twelve or thirteen at that time and I had done a little bit of French at school. I was very free when we were on holidays near Nice. I could take the bus down to Nice itself, see where the other buses were going and go off by myself. I am amazed now that my parents were happy to let me do that. They were worrying all the time but that was good. To go about a foreign country by myself at that time and to practice using a different language, that was really good for me, I am sure.

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So you have moved to London, you want intellectual stimulation, you have discovered this book. How many years were you at that before you linked in with Oxford?

A

Five years and during those five years I was reading and re-reading this text more seriously. About 1987 I decided I will try and do a part time Ph.D. on it. And of course in London there is Birbeck College where they specialise in part-time students. That was very important really. I applied to Birbeck and I was accepted. Maybe, I shouldn't have been because my first degree was a 2.2 and you wouldn't normally expect to go on and do a PhD after having gotten a 2.2 in your first degree. Birbeck is a bit more flexible about that kind of thing. They take account of intervening experiences so anyway they accepted me to work on ancient Greek food history with that text as the main basis. I did that in five years. I completed it in early 1993 if I remember rightly. By which time I was a habitu  of the Oxford Food Symposium. I had also been to a conference in Turkey as well, one of those

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And who was your supervisor in Birbeck?

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That was Jane Rowlinson. She was not a food specialist. There was not any academic food speciality really in most places at that time! She was an ancient Greek historian. Her speciality was Egypt in fact.

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You built up a number of friendships with people here over the years?

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Yes, I did quite early on and for that I remember the conference in Turkey as much as a couple of the early Oxford Symposiums that I went to. There was quite a coincidence about the people there was at both. Maria Jose Sevilla whom I was sitting next to at lunch just now, she was there in Turkey as well, in Istanbul and the Mars's were there. It was at that conference in Istanbul that the Mars's put together a series of symposia which they held at their house for about three years. A publication came out of that and again quite a lot of people that I have known, whose work I have known pretty well.

I

So there was nearly a small research cluster centred on the Mars's?

A

Yes, there was. Malcolm Thick who still comes here to Oxford, he was one of those. Others who come to Oxford...I am trying to think. No perhaps not. Other people working in areas like me classics, Emily Gowers.

I

What about Sally Grainger, was she part of that?

A

No she wasn't part of that but I met Sally at about that time and I will tell you why. I was attending a seminar as a Ph.D. student in London and I sat next to a fellow from Royal Holloway College who said "my girlfriend, I am sure, would like to know you because she is interested in ancient food as well". That girlfriend was Sally Grainger. So from that I was invited to take part in Sally's first reconstruction of a Roman meal which historically is a great honour because she has done so much of that and gone on so much further with that since then. But that first Roman meal that Sally held at Royal Holloway was the farewell to their professor of classics who was moving to Oxford. That was Martin West, M. L. West. He died just a year or so ago now. A great, great classicist and I think he enjoyed the Roman meal as well. We had a good time.

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That whole Istanbul, Turkey thing, the core of Oxford from the beginning seemed to go regularly to that over a period of two to three years. Was it all expenses paid? You were looked after very well if I am not mistaken. There were some very good meals and you probably got to know each other very well.

A

You were there for a week and that gives you a good time to get to know one another better. It was not all roses you know there in Istanbul. I was only at one of those conferences and I can tell you that the accommodation was about the most uncomfortable place that I have ever stayed. It was a holiday camp for journalists and journalists obviously did not demand too much around Istanbul in those days. There were mosquitos and there were shared and fairly basic washing facilities and that was about it. But the food was great and for a couple of days at the end of the conference we were staying in Istanbul itself. We were at the Pera Palace hotel in fact. The greatest person that I remember there but I am damned if I can remember her name. She was eighty-four. An American who had lived in Smyrna for at least 50 years I would say. At the age of eighty-four she had taken a twenty-four-hour bus ride to come from Smyrna to Istanbul. She was the one who made sure I got to see Ataturk's room in that hotel which is kept as a museum but was not at that stage advertised to everyone. She just demanded at the desk that we get to see Ataturk's room so we did. And I have her book too, I will remember her name, her book on edible wild flowers of Western Turkey. Yes, made some good contacts there.

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Over the years are there any particular symposiums or speakers that stood out for you or that you can remember? I know it is a difficult question.

A

It can be a difficult question because they all blend together you see. I have been trying to remember and I can't remember where was it I previously met Tim Lang who gave the keynote talk yesterday. And it was a long time ago. At the end of it he said do you remember how long ago it was we met. I said yes, roughly I do but I can't remember on what occasion whether that was at a symposium? It might have been.

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I think I remember he was here. I was wondering was it Food and Morality maybe? I am trying to think of which of the themes would have covered his area best.

A

I think I met him at something completely different way well before that.

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On the Mars's, Gerald had done a lot of work and I remember his famous book, was it The World of Waiters?

A

Yes, the World of Waiters

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Which was brilliant and he had done a lot of work on that idea of cheats at workbut about the smaller research clusters. You were saying a publication came out of it. What was that based around.

A

It was Food and Anthropology because he is an anthropologist. His wife Val is a historian rather than an anthropologist. They are great people, neither of them perhaps typical academics.

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I admired both the Mars's work. Have many opportunities opened up from your experiences here? In fact, we have not mentioned that you moved to France

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That is true. We bought a house in France because when our children were small we often used to travel to France on holidays. Middle France was a good aim so as not to be too far from home and not too boring and long a journey and to find somewhere comfortable to stay. So eventually we looked for a house in that middle part of France and we found one Poitou Charentes, not very far from Poitiers, not very far from Cognac. We used it as a holiday home for about eight, nine, ten years maybe. Then the children moved away from home and we decided that we would make a break for freedom and we moved there full time. My wife Maureen is a teacher but around that time I suppose she was fifty and I was fifty-three. She had had about enough of teaching and if she had been a year older she would have taken early retirement. The option was withdrawn for early retirement and she decided, she is a fairly decisive person, to take it anyway. I thought I would try

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and make a living writing about history, food history. or about whatever. So that was when we moved when I was about fifty-three. I did manage to make a kind of living for the next ten, twelve years just enough to keep me on the books as an earning author as far as French Social Security was concerned. It was quite important that because you had to have a source of income and so that was all right. So we made a go of it. I don't think I would have been able to make a go of that for very much longer. So it was just as well that as publishing was becoming more uncertain as far as money was concerned, that I came up for retirement about that time.

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You started to move with the time though as publishing started to change and the internet was taking hold you started to embrace the idea of Wikipedia and the internet. Tell us about that?

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Yes, I did. Well, as a librarian I had always been used to computers, databases and what you can get from computers, word processing. I fell for word processing when it came to writing a Ph.D. because I could never have, I am sure, finished the thing if I had to type it all or pay someone to type it all neatly. Doing it on a word processor, well, that was wonderful. So I was used to that. As I went on writing I began to realise that I was making masses of notes on my own computer that I would never use. You only use some of the notes you make and that nobody else would ever see. And about that time after rejecting the idea of such a thing as an open encyclopaedia I began to realise, this would have been around 2005, that it was going to be the thing of the future. It would grow and it would more or less eclipse the Encyclopaedia Britannica for example as it has and that there would not be printed encyclopaedias forever in the future. I began to see that I could contribute to it and it struck me eventually that I could contribute to Wikipedia and make my notes at the same time. So essentially that was what I began to do. If you do that on the English Wikipedia, you do run a fairly strong risk that as it grows the things that you wanted to put on it will be obliterated by later things in the nature of things and won't eventually be very findable anymore. So I took the further step of joining the Latin Wikipedia. On the Latin Wikipedia is now where I make my notes and where I keep my bibliography. So I start a short article, I give it a serious bibliography, I put in links and there are so many more external links to put in all the time. New papers that are going on Academia.edu before or when they are published. All that open access material, Archive.Org and even Google Books, dear old Google Books. That is now where I make my notes.

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Brilliant, the Latin one is really clever. More recently you have been involved in the symposia with the whole Wiki Project. The idea to try and increase the amount of entries on food etc.

A

Yes, well, I have been helping. I did not initiate that project. Although I tried a few years ago to get people interested in adding to Wikipedia here and maybe there was a memory of that. It was really Bee Wilson who had that idea afresh really and has managed to develop it so well. Bee and then Carolin Young and then others, Polly Russell

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At the moment are there any major projects you are working on or are you trying to wind down a little bit?

A

I shall always go on writing. I may not always go on aiming to write whole books. There are a lot of books in the world. I have just finished one. I have to go back to the car and deliver it because it is for Reaktion Books and there is Michael Leaman waiting with bated breath to accept the manuscript I hope. That is a history of food in Greece from archaeology to the present time. That's not just me. That's me and my daughter Rachel who lives in Greece and together we have worked on that. She has done the recipes because I am not a practical cook. I talk about food. I am not totally impractical, I make cider, I do things with fruit and I am pretty pleased with my cider but I am not practical in the kitchen.

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You have two children?

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Yes, two daughters. Elizabeth in Somerset, living in Wells in Somerset with her two children of hers Istar and Till and Rachel living in Greece.

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It must be exciting to be delivering a manuscript that you have worked on with your daughter. That is something special! One for the grandchildren!

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It's not my first collaboration because in fact one of my two first books was also Sally Grainger's book. That meeting with her led to a collaboration from time to time ever since. We have been together at quite a lot of her reconstructions of meals and we did work on the classical cookbook. That is my most successful book and that's the one Sally and I did together. Then a sort of long term sequel to that was the Shakespeare cookbook which my wife Maureen and I did together three or four years ago.

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And of course you were involved in the Oxford Companion to Food and Cookery. You did a number of entries for that to?

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Yes, Alan roped me into that and so I worked with him again on that and of course submitting stuff to PPC as well and got to know Helen in that way because Helen Saberi was working long term on that.

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I think we better stop talking and go back to the talks. It was very nice talking to you and thank you very much.

End of interview