

Auckland University of Technology

Lorna Piatti-Farnell

Sure to rise: reading the *Edmonds cookery book* as a popular icon

Abstract:

Cookbooks are one of a variety of written forms that can be read as historical documents, functioning as testaments to individual, familial and cultural development. In the recipe, one can find a sense of culinary preference which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by a sense of belonging and identity. The (post-) colonial past of countries such as New Zealand and Australia allows a particular view into reading cookery books as chronicles of everyday life as well as an archive of cultural memory, uses and popular customs. Starting from the premise that cookbooks can function as a site for heritage and identity, this paper addresses the status of the *Edmonds cookery book* as a popularised national icon. Now an established presence within New Zealand's culinary culture, the Edmonds collection – first published in 1908 as *The sure to rise cookery book* – has evolved over the decades to include new and updated recipes, mirroring the cultural and socio-historical moment in which it was placed. With this in mind, I analyse how cookbook writing can be interpreted as a national practice which owes a lot of its success to pervasive links to popular culture. My paper also offers a critical framework which highlights the material conditions – historical, aesthetico-political and socio-cultural – that encouraged the rise and popularity of the Edmonds cookbook within an expanding national readership.

Biographical note:

Dr Lorna Piatti-Farnell is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Industries at Auckland University of Technology. Her research interests focus mainly on twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture, food and culinary scholarship, film studies, anime and manga, Gothic fiction and cultural history. She has published widely within the food studies field. Her publications include two monographs; *Food and culture in contemporary American fiction* (Routledge, 2011) and *Beef: a global history* (Reaction, 2013). As part of her research work, Lorna has also published several book chapters and journals articles on food in contemporary fiction, culinary memoirs, food practices in American animation and 'Gothic food'.

Keywords:

Food writing – New Zealand – Cookery books – Edmonds Cookery Book

Discussing the conceptual nature of cookbooks, Janet Theophano argues that ‘in displaying their cuisine, the compilers of cookbooks portray and define an image of themselves, their cultural groups, and their own rendering of their groups’ history and identity’ (2002: 83). Cookbooks are one of a variety of written forms that can be read as historical documents, functioning as testaments to individual, familial and cultural development. In the recipe, one can find a sense of culinary preference which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by a sense of belonging and identity. Writing about the practice of recipe collection, Jessahym Neuhaus points out that cookbooks ‘reveal much about the societies that produce them’ (2003: 1). The (post-) colonial past of countries such as New Zealand and Australia allows a particular view into reading cookery books as chronicles of everyday life as well as an archive of cultural memory, uses and popular customs.

Starting from the premise that cookbooks can function as a site for heritage and identity, this chapter addresses the status of the *Edmonds cookery book* as a popularised national icon. Now an established presence within New Zealand’s culinary culture, the Edmonds collection – first published in 1908 as *The sure to rise cookery book* – has evolved over the decades to include new and updated recipes, mirroring the cultural and socio-historical moment in which it was placed. With this in mind, I analyse how cookbook writing can be interpreted as a national practice which owes a lot of its success to pervasive links to popular culture. My discussion also offers a critical framework which highlights the material conditions – historical, aesthetico-political and socio-cultural – that encouraged the rise and popularity of the *Edmonds cookery book* within an expanding national readership.

The brand, the history, the writing

The history of the *Edmonds cookery book* is inevitably tied to the establishment, development and success of the Thomas Edmonds manufacturing company. The group made its fortune selling baking products throughout New Zealand. It was founded by Thomas Edmonds, a grocer, in the late 1870s. The business was based in Lyttleton, New Zealand, and its beginnings were inspired by well-known and wide-spread complaints by local housewives about the unreliability of the baking powder they were using. In 1879, Edmonds – then still a travelling salesman – produced and sold his first batch of 200 tins of baking powder, ensuring his customers that their goods were ‘sure to rise’ whenever his product was used (NZ History on-line). At that time, what was born was not only a longstanding promotional slogan, but also the unshakeable reputation of Edmonds’ business. The popularity of Edmonds’ product spread throughout the Canterbury region, and demand for his baking products grew. The tins containing the baking powder became synonymous with quality and reliability and, in a very short period of time, Edmonds’ product was known, used, and respected throughout New Zealand. The distinctive ‘rising sun’ trademark of Edmonds’ products was quickly associated with cakes and all baking needs. In 1908, the *Edmonds cookery book* was produced by the manufacturers as part of the advertising campaign for the baking products; this first edition was presented as a five-page pamphlet, promoting Edmonds product through ‘economical everyday recipes and cooking hints’.

Unsurprisingly, the book contained a number of recipes for dishes which necessitated the use of a number of Edmonds products, from baking powders to jellies (NZ History on-line). This structure and organisation of the volume is in keeping with the cookbook's episodic nature and how recipe building, as Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster put it, interacts with personal 'spheres of daily experience' (2003: 1). The circulation of the original cookery book – which was, in simple terms, a strategically conceived marketing ploy – proved very successful and the numbers of Edmonds products sold grew as expected. The second edition of the cookbook – published in 1910 – had a print run of 150,000, a truly gigantic number for the time. The popularity of the *Edmonds cookery book* has been unscathed over the years; in 2008, the sixtieth edition of the text was published – containing even more updated and contemporary versions of the recipes – and remains, to this day, New Zealand's 'best-selling book'.

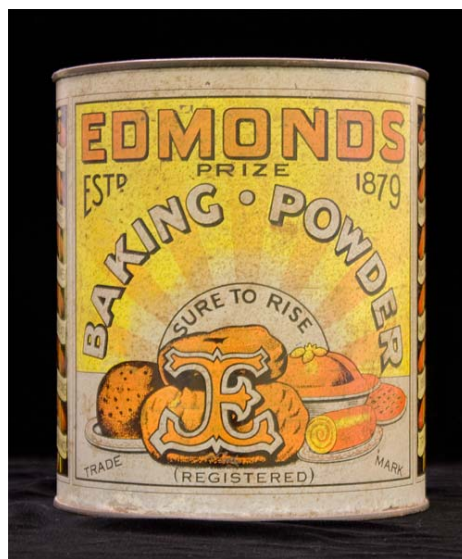


Fig. 1. An early tin for Edmonds baking powder (1912) *Te Ara: The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*

The inception, development and success of the Edmonds cookbook does not just speak of the impact of marketing on business relation or the function of promotional material establishing brand dynamics within the public opinion. Undoubtedly, one could pursue an analysis of how the initial publication of the Edmonds cookbook represented an important moment in the construction of a very New Zealand-based consumer culture, where business strategies and the politics of demand intersected towards the building of a capitalistic identity for the nation. That approach, in its persuasive nature, would only provide part of the critique. The recipes, although connected to Edmonds products by business strategies, also mirror culinary preferences of the time. This validates Floyd and Foster's assertion that cookbooks provide records of 'historical and cultural moments' (2003: 2). In its value as a promotional product, found at a particular chronological period within a specific geographical reality, the *Edmonds cookery book* also plays testament to how recipes – entangled as they are with everyday practices in terms of custom, preference and availability – can act as the simultaneously conceptual and practical transposition of a national mentality and its development over time. In that sense, The *Edmonds cookery book* contains a gastro-cultural knowledge which, in Theophano's words, 'transcends

generations' (2002: 49). Within the volume's the Edmonds recipes, one can find a sense of culinary preference which simultaneously shapes and is shaped by a sense of belonging and identity. As a result, the recipes can be read a historical document, functioning as testaments to individual, familial and cultural development (Piatti-Farnell 2011). The cookery book, in turn, acts as the repository for historical memory, an artefact for remembrance that, as it is presented to the public, constructs its own reality as part of popular and cultural iconography.

Cookbooks, nation and identity

In *Tasting food, tasting freedom*, social anthropologist Sydney Mintz reminds us that 'food is never simply eaten [...] [it] has histories associated with the pasts of those who eat' it (1996: 7). The historical nature of recipe collections also highlights how the writing, circulation and success of the Edmonds cookbook can be read as a national practice, inevitably connected to matters of pride, community and exchange. There is no denying the part played for decades by the Cookbook in its conceptual function as a jelling agent for the nation. In *Kiwi milestones*, Ron Palenski says that for several generations of New Zealanders the book was 'as much a part of New Zealand kitchens as a stove and knife', and that at one time it was 'sent unsolicited to every newly engaged couple in New Zealand' (2004: 14). The ability of the *Edmonds cookbook* to mould itself into a 'national icon' is not surprising, considering its pragmatic function as an item containing recipes. The etymological origin of the word 'recipe' provides us with a further insight into the nature of the exchange. The word 'recipe' finds its root in the Latin word *reciperere*, meaning simultaneously 'to give and to receive' (Floyd & Foster 2003: 6). When it comes to decoding the writing of *The Edmonds cookbook*, the nature of the exchange is steeped in identity structures of a cultural and geographical nature.

The recipes included in the first editions of the cookbook were inevitably inherited by British culinary traditions. The attachment to the 'motherland' was understandable in both historical and cultural terms, considering that, when the cookbook was initially published, New Zealand was still a British colony, known as the 'dominion of New Zealand'. The cover of the Cookbook's third edition (dated 1914) is particular evocative here. The front cover includes the now iconic images of the Edmonds food empire, including its famous slogan (still in use today) of 'sure to rise'. Although it is true that, historically speaking, the catchphrase found its simple origins in Edmonds' original claim of efficiency for his products, another level of meaning can be found for the slogan, one that bears a connection to political and national identity. To find this, one needs to look at the back cover of the third edition: what we are presented with is a picture of the Edmonds baking powder tin, impressed over a map of New Zealand. The claim 'the Dominion's favourite' joins the two images together. From the top left-hand corner, the sun shines on both Edmonds and New Zealand, as its rays are once again entangled with the 'sure to rise' slogan. The interplay between slogan, image and product here is revelatory. The subtle suggestion is that what is 'to rise' is not only baked good, but also Edmonds and a brand, and New Zealand as a country.

The back cover conveys a desire to see New Zealand expand and prosper, perhaps as an individual entity, within the greater Empire. This feeling was pervasive in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, the quick growth that New Zealand was experiencing was captured in several propagandist and satirical cartoons of the time. With this in mind, it is possible to read the proliferation of the *Edmonds cookbook* as part of a general structure of progress and improvement which saw New Zealand as a country at its centre; the growth desired not only political and financial, but also cultural, as the cover of the volume suggests strength and unification for new Zealand's economy, government and population. Nick Fiddes reminds us that 'the foods we select reflect our thought', including 'our conception' of our way of life, and our perception of the people 'with whom we wish to identify' (1991: 43). The 'favourite foods' contained in the cookery book become the tangible expression of the group's position and individuality, as the idea of a 'national cuisine' becomes instrumental in the creation of a national identity. One can see here how, 'through the exploitation of culinary knowledge, conceptions of identity are inevitably reinforced, so that 'food recipes' can come to 'represent a form of recognisable heritage for any social and ethnic group' (Piatti-Farnell 2001: 14).

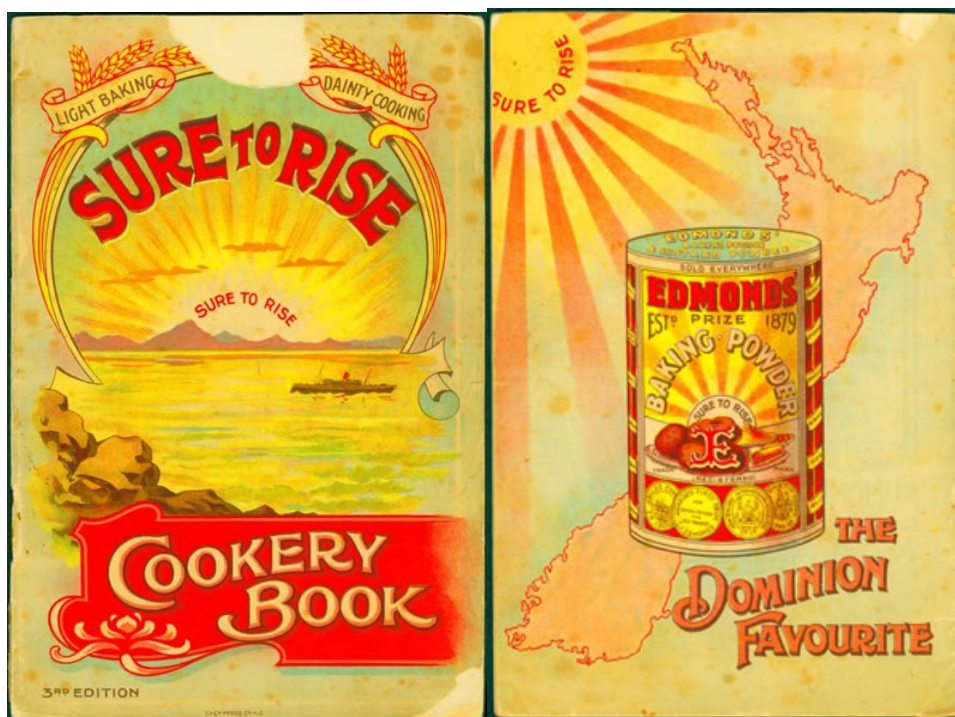


Fig. 2. Cover of the *Edmonds 'Sure to rise' cookery book*, third edition (1914). Published by baking manufacturer T.J. Edmonds. Source: The New Zealand Electronic Text Collection.

Indeed, it is possible to read the creation of the *Edmonds cookery book* as the result of a conceptual desire to build on a sense of local affiliation. This interpretation seems in keeping with food's anthropological function as a mnemonic agent of attachment and membership. Discussing the personal nature of cookbooks, Theophano points out that 'cookbooks are one of a variety of written forms, such as diaries and journals, that [people] have adapted to recount and enrich their lives [...] blending raw ingredients into a new configuration' (2002: 122). In its role as an 'everyday' item, food habits

have the privilege to regulate life and build of picture of what is considered normal and sound. In cultural terms, the production of a sense of identity – both group and individual – is inevitably connected to the ‘domestication of artefacts’ (Dyson 2002: 129), an appropriation of objects into the generative organisation of life and lifestyle. Episodes of consumption are characterised by specific conditions which, both representationally and practically, bear and affiliation with the context in which they take place. ‘Commensal artefacts’ do not just include food and drink, but all those structures of culinary production to which recipes clearly belong. Connected to chronological and social situations, the culinary acts as an agent of memory, an embodied delegation of place and people. With their material connotations, food items functions, in Nadia Seremetakis’s words, as ‘passageways’ into the ‘entanglements of everyday [...] experience’ (1996: 14).

As an object, the *Edmonds cookery book* belongs to both the private and the public spheres. It’s writing, therefore, cannot be interpreted as the isolated and detached act of a few, but must be considered as a national domestic practice. The geographical mapping of the cookbook meets the social topography of population through the concept of ‘favourite’ and, to some extent, essential. The act of collecting, and therefore making public, speaks to the cultural desire to find a distinct voice amidst the group and the need – if it may be regarded as such – to identify New Zealand as an individual entity both physically and conceptually. The practice of cooking – reliant as it is on matters of timing and methods – is also connected on the application of specific knowledge and organisation. Cooking is not only a matter of acquired skill, but also a transportation of a sense of culinary preference which lies at the heart of concepts of belonging and identity (Piatti-Farnell 2011). Inextricably connected to cooking as a cultural practice, the recipe is endowed with meaning not only as an embodiment of culinary knowledge, but also for its value as an agent of social reproduction. One they are purposefully collected into a cookbook – especially one intended for public viewing and use – recipes become objects which ‘function synecdochally’ within the collection itself, taking on an ‘aura’ of significance which is ‘imbued’ with ‘temporal and spatial identity’ (Dyson 2002: 130).

In his study of society and taste, Pierre Bourdieu drew attention to the act of cataloguing and collecting as a ‘paradigmatic’ practice’, where that which is collected signifies as positional goods. The collection itself, especially when connected to items that stand for the ‘everyday’ – such as food-related items – function as markers of relative status – defining, as Linda Dyson re-elaborates, the ‘domain of the subject’ (2002: 129). In this framework, the act of collecting recipes, and circulating them nation-wide in the form of a cookbook, can be understood as a form of socio-cultural marking, an aesthetic and political identification of the nation’s coveted group identity through culinary knowledge that defines it on a cultural level. As a written item of ‘distinction’ – to use Bourdieu’s term – the inception and subsequent establishment of the *Edmonds cookery book* draws attention to how food is connected to matters of naturalised identification. Considered as an inherently ‘Kiwi item’, the Edmonds volume highlights clusters of cultural value which join social grouping with everyday practice at a ‘particular historical conjuncture’ (Dyson 2002: 130).

As a written piece and a collection of everyday items, the Edmonds cookbook can be interpreted as an indicator of what is ‘known’ accessible, Kiwi and, inevitably ‘not Other’ (Appadurai 1996). Bringing together the nation through consolidating culinary preferences (or intended culinary preferences) into one object, the Cookbook operates within the cultural sphere of the ‘system of objects’ – as Jean Baudrillard would put it – through a communicative space (Baudrillard 2006). The cultural landscape of New Zealand as a country is joined with the specialised landscape of culinary habits. As a construction of the colonial identity – and, in contemporary times, of the post-colonial self – the Edmonds cookbook makes a virtue of moulding food into affiliation through what Michel De Certeau defines as the ‘rhetoric of collecting’, a carved route of national association where food works a subtext for belonging (De Certeau 1994).

A popular icon

The impact of the *Edmonds cookery book* is visible not only in its role as a New Zealand national icon, but also in its ability to conquer the popular imagination over the years. On that front, the success of the book itself as an item belonging to popular culture owes as much to its association to the greater Edmonds baking product empire as it does to its distinctive content and features. Since its original publication in New Zealand, the *Edmonds cookery book* has sold over three million copies.

It is the general consent of the New Zealand population that the Edmonds cookery book, together with several other corporate product – especially the ubiquitous baking powder – belongs to a specific collection of recognisable objects and images known as ‘Kiwiana’. A definition for this term comes straight from the catalogue convenors of the national Museum of Te Papa in Wellington, who have described Kiwiana as ‘the stuff of everyday New Zealand life’ (Dyson 2002: 130). The appellation, one could argue, is loaded with conceptions about what makes the ‘Kiwi everyday’ distinctive from others, and how to identify objects, subjects and concepts which are instrumental in painting an affectionate and relatively accurate – albeit caricatured – vision of life in New Zealand (Wolfe & Bennett 2007: 4). The almost sentimental attachment to Kiwiana is also commemorated in a famous popular image by the famous mural in the town of Otorohanga – in the Waikato region – where exemplary items from the category are immortalised in art for everyone to recognise, honour and love. The Edmonds tin, unsurprisingly, is given pride of place on the wall. The Te Papa Museum, for its part, has made a clear attempt at giving an outlook on New Zealand life, by curating an exposition of objects seen as distinctive Kiwiana; these include examples from different areas of popular culture and include buzzy bee toys, gumboots, ‘number 8 wire’, ‘Kiwi Boot Polish’, *paua* shells, All Blacks memorabilia, pineapple lumps and, of course, vintage tins and related products from the Edmonds baking powder universe. These items are representative of New Zealand heritage in the popular imagination. The objects are seen as ‘quirky things that contribute to a sense of nationhood’ (Te Ara Encyclopaedia).

connection to what is ‘loved’ and appreciated by the population, as an instrumental vector, the *Edmonds cookery book* underpin its popularity by serving a dual function for the population: a trusted and historically sound culinary text, on the one hand, and a popular sign of shared new Zealand identity on the other. The popular function of the *Edmonds cookery book* and its related ‘essential’ baking products is evident in several aspects of popular culture. Indeed, one can purchase commemorative tea towels, aprons, posters, fridge magnets and postcards showing pictures of Edmonds baking products and the cookery book in its various incarnations over the years. In the aftermath of the devastating earthquakes that strongly affected the city of Christchurch in 2010 and 2011, the local authorities borrowed the Edmonds slogan on a number of inspirational items, showing their determination and their belief that they were ‘sure to rise’ from the catastrophe.

As a popular souvenir – purchased, oddly, more by the New Zealand population than the international tourists – the Edmonds memorabilia highlight a system of symbolic attachment which is symptomatic of a specific cultural organisation, and unearths, as Susan Stewart puts it, the ability of recognisable objects to ‘domesticate’ experience within popular parameters (1993: 134). In 2008, New Zealand Post even issued a commemorative stamp for the Edmonds products as part of the ‘Kiwiana series’; the stamp showcased the famous Edmonds logo and distinctive colours of orange and yellow. The presence of a stylised fern in the corner of the stamp – one of the most culturally salient symbol of New Zealand as a country – reinforced the connection between Edmonds cookery as ‘the brand’ and popular Kiwi identity. By sheer presence, the printing of the Edmonds logo – with its several associations to recipes and cooking for the ‘everyday New Zealander’ – acknowledge the role played by the *Edmonds cookery book* as an inscribed part of New Zealand’s past and the population’s desire to maintain a connection with its most popular and beloved icons. The *Edmonds cookery book*, it would seem, is more than an unassuming collection of recipes, but has entered the ‘pantheon of national icons’ through the power of popular representation (Dyson 2002: 130).

Conclusion

When placed in a system of cultural communication, the *Edmonds cookery book* emerges as an important item of local materiality, imbued with, as Claudia Bell would put it, ‘accumulated meanings’ (2012: 349). In its status as a popular icon, the cookbook goes beyond its function as a cooking aid, and enters the performative arena of identity as an important medium for membership and affiliation. As an active assemblage of past and present, the *Edmonds cookery book* reveals the implications of national reinvention, and the part played by everyday objects in representing both ‘the private, inside world’ of the individual (Money 2007: 357), and the dominant values of a whole socio-cultural group. Exposed as an important and highly charged representative of Kiwiana, the *Edmonds cookery book* exposes the mergence of national practices with consumer politics, proving that, in the construction of fundamental frameworks of cultural communication, material goods are purposefully utilised to fulfil and legitimise the existence of social difference. This view of the

Edmonds cookery book validates, in an aimed and locally-based fashion, Elizabeth DeMarrais' claim that everyday objects function as the 'materialisation of culture', providing the ephemeral concepts of national 'values, stories' and 'myth' with a tangible 'physical reality' (2004: 11).

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