EDMUND MASON, MRS IRVING AND THE FIRST AUSTRALIAN COOKERY BOOK

Paul van Reyk, Jacqui Newling, and Alison Vincent

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*he English and* *Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many, as well as the Upper Ten Thousand – by an Australian Aristologist* is usually given the place of Australia’s first published cookery book.1 The ‘Australian Aristologist’ was Tasmanian politician Edward Abbott and his book was published in London in 1864.2 This claim has now been challenged. 3 While conducting research on an unrelated topic Paul van Reyk came across a front-page advertisement in the first edition of the *Parramatta Chronicle and Cumberland General Advertiser,* dated 30 December 1843:

To the Ladies.

THE ONLY WORK OF THE KIND PUBLISHED IN THE COLONY.

*THE Housewife’s Guide; or an Economical and Domestic ART OF*

*COOKERY, containing Directions for Marketing, Instructions for Dressing*

*Butchers’ Meat, Poultry, Game, Fish, Vegetables, &c; likewise for Preparing*

*Soups, Broths, Gravies, and Sauces; also the Art of Potting, Collaring, Pickling, Preserving, and Making Wines: to which is added the different Branches of Modern Pastry and Confectionery, &c. &c. &c.*

*Cookery has long since been considered an art worthy the particular attention of Females, as food in general, when properly cooked, not only becomes more palatable, but MORE WHOLESOME. It is therefore hoped that Females who superintend this important branch of domestic business, and who wish to unite hospitality with economy, will find this publication answer the purpose for which it was intended, for it is the wish of the Compiler to furnish the young Housekeeper with a considerable number of receipts, to which she may have recourse whenever occasion requires; to point out the best method of preparing those things which are frequently wanted in a family, and to enable her to render them agreeable to the palate, consistently with the rules of frugality and economy. It is also hoped, that this publication will answer the purpose much better than those published in the mother country — for although it contains many receipts for particular dishes which are much too expensive for common use, it also comprises many others adapted to daily service; and it must be remembered that a Cookery Book is generally consulted at a time when some article out of the Common course is wanted, or the table is to be set out for company.*

After a full list of the book’s contents the advertisement continues:

*In this concise work which contains every information necessary for a family, and combines refinements of the art with economy, will be found that sound information, which will, considerably reduce the expenses of a family in the housekeeping department; and though small in price, the real value can scarcely be estimated as, by an attention to its rules, it not only secures praise to the Cook, but gives, profit and satisfaction to. the family.*

The publication was priced at one shilling and available ‘wholesale and retail at the Parramatta Printing Office, and at Mr. Morley’s, Stationer, King-street, Sydney, and all respectable stationers in the colony’*.* Further research located a shorter advertisement inthe *Sydney Morning Herald* which confirms the exact date of first publication as 14 October 1843.4The three of us are culinary historians and had never come across this book. To the best of our knowledge, it has not been referenced in any history of Australian food or bibliography of Australian cookbooks, nor is it listed in library catalogues. We were excited by the discovery and set out to find out more. If it was locally produced, *The Housewife’s Guide* pre-dates Abbott’s cookery book by 21 years.5

The publisher of *The Housewife’s Guide* was also the publisher of the *Parramatta* *Chronicle* – Edmund Mason. Born in 1818 at Clerkenwell, Edmund Mason was the son of William Mason, a printer of ‘pamphlets, small books, song books etc.’ 6 When he was seven years old, William Mason, who had been ‘pretty well off … got poor’. Edmund put this down to William’s ‘dabbling in steamboats and Vauxhall gardens and many other things out of his own business, by which he not only lost money but also lost his business through neglect.’ Consequent to the family’s financial straits, at nine years old Edmund began his working life as an errand boy. But at sixteen he found that he was ‘learning nothing about any business or otherwise doing any good for myself and an opening offering for me to go and sell my father’s books about the country, I accepted it and kept to it for four years.’ At twenty he began to learn printing at his father’s business and in London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. Two years later he heard that printers were wanted in Sydney, in the colony of New South Wales, with free passage as a sweetener. He and his brother William were contracted in London to work for the publishers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Sydney’s leading newspaper. Edmund, William and William’s wife, Catherine, arrived in Sydney on the *Mary Anne* in 1840.7 After working for the *Herald* for two years, Edmund Mason set up his own printer’s shop in Sydney, drawing on his experience both as printer and an itinerant book seller. He began by establishing his first newspaper, *The Sun and New South Wales Independent Press*, in early 1843, and evidently, by October that year, publishing *The Housewife’s Guide.*8 By December 1843, he had relocated his printing business sixteen miles inland to Parramatta, the first major township west of Sydney, where, as yet, there was no established printing business. The 1840s were years of serious financial stress in the colony and Parramatta’s fortunes were in decline. To his dismay Mason found ‘there was very little printing to be done – not above one day’s work a week, so I started a Weekly Newspaper, out of which, after working hard on it personally, the return was only one pound weekly’.9

The four-page weekly newspaper was the *Parramatta Chronicle and Cumberland General Advertiser*, which Mason published until September 1845 when he sold it, choosing to concentrate on his stationery, printing and book-selling business for another twenty years. After retiring, he established an orchard, growing oranges on land he owned nearby. Edmund Mason became a highly respected resident of Parramatta. At various times he was an alderman of the Parramatta Borough Council, a founding member of the Benevolent Society, a member of the Board of Parramatta Hospital and active in the management of the local School of Arts. He died in November 1899, aged 81. Recognized as ‘the father of Parramatta journalism’, neither of the two obituaries we have accessed make mention of *Mrs Irving’s Housewife’s Guide*.10

It is unclear what prompted Mason to choose a cookery book as one of his first ventures into local publishing, but whatever his reason *The Housewife’s Guide* found an audience. In July 1844, the *Chronicle* advised that ‘a second impression has been thrown off and is ready for publication.’11 While no author had been acknowledged in all the advertising to that date, this second edition was promoted as *Mrs Irving’s Housewife’s Guide*. We are yet to find a physical copy of Mrs Irving’s book.12 It is likely that Mason’s print runs were small and no copies have survived.13 What we did find was a book with the identical title, written by Mrs Deborah Irwin, ‘23 years cook to a tradesman with a large family’, published in England by Mason’s father in 1830.14 The similarity of the names of the putative authors, the identical titles and that the books were published by father and son were intriguing. Was the Mrs Irving book simply a reprint of ~~the~~ Mrs Irwin’s ~~book~~? If so, it would not qualify as an ‘Australian’ cookbook.15

We were able to access a digital copy of Irwin’s book to compare the contents of the two books, most of which is the same. The majority of recipes in Mrs Irving’s book were British by nature and origin, as is typical in many Australian cookbooks published later in the nineteenth century, and its genesis could indeed have been Irwin’s book. However, there are distinct differences in the colonial publication, reflecting a clear intent to localize the content to suit the available produce and climate. In his promotional pitch, Mason was confident that ‘this publication will answer the purpose much better than those published in the mother country’.16

The section on ROASTING in the original Irwin book contains several recipes for game – hare, partridge, pheasant – none of which is listed in the Australian edition. Recipes for rabbits and pigeons, which were bred for the table by colonists, are found in both. Likewise, in the section TO DRESS FISH Irwin refers to fish species common in Britain – sole, carp, haddock, grayling, trout, perch, tench and others – which do not appear in Mrs Irving’s version, while salmon, snapper and mackarel (sic), which are found in Australian waters, do.

Mrs Irving’s book has sections not included in the Irwin version. PRESERVED MEAT features recipes for salting and smoking ham and mutton, the latter not in abundant enough supply in England to require curing/salting down. ‘Mutton hams’ were common in Australia, however. Similarly, a section on SYRUPS contains two recipes which may have been useful to the local reader. Capillaire, traditionally made from maidenhair fern, was an import product in the 1840s, but several species of maidenhair are native to Australia, so could perhaps be made domestically. Similarly, ‘Pine apply syrup’ presumably refers to a preparation made from or with pineapples. Pineapples were a luxury in Britain but were grown in the colony and sold at local produce markets in the 1840s. The commercial production of pineapple in Australia also dates to this time, so recipes utilizing them may have appealed to readers keen to make use of their exotic flavour.

The most striking departure from the English book is a recipe for Native currant jam in ‘CONFECTIONARY PRESERVES &c’. Native currants (*Leptomeria acida*) were eaten by local First Nations people and were popular for making jams and pies in the early colony.17 While possibly a simple relabelling of the blackcurrant jam recipe in Irwin’s cookbook, the inclusion of this ingredient in particular signifies the localized nature of Mrs Irving’s version.

In February 1844 Edmund Mason advertised another book first published by his father William: *The General Receipt Book: Containing an Extensive Collection of Valuable Receipts, Connected With Domestic Economy* by James Laughton*.* The ‘receipts’ are mostly a miscellany of instructions for home cures, household cleaning products, personal grooming products, and the like. There are receipts for some foodstuffs: spruce beer, ginger beer, ginger cakes, to sweeten fish that is ‘tainted’, and preserving eggs. A comparison of the two editions does not suggest that Edmund Mason localized Laughton’s book as he had done with the *Housewife’s Guide.*18

While others in the colony were importing or reprinting cookery texts from Britainand America, Edmund Mason was publishing a localized version of a book first published by his father in Britain. From identifying the various differences between the contents of the two books we have established that the colonial version was not just a reprint of Irwin’s. Given its localized content we can confidently claim that *Mrs Irving’s Housewife’s Guide* is the first cookbook produced and published in Australia, albeit based on an English precursor. But can it really be considered Australia’s first cookbook? Following the four criteria proposed by Barbara Santich in 1999, we come very close to asserting that it deserves this accolade. It is evidently ‘written specifically for Australians’; the list of contents indicates that it does ‘reflect the cooking practices of Australians’ at the time, and it appears to ‘have enough local content as to make it recognisably Australian’ – whether it was ‘written by an Australian’ is still in question.

Was there indeed a Mrs Irving? We have thus far found no-one of that name living in the colony at the time. Or did Mason purposefully misspell or manipulate the earlier author’s name for his edition? And if so, was it likely he had sufficient knowledge to adapt the material himself or did he rely on someone with more experience? These questions remain, but can we safely say, ‘move over, Edward Abbott. Mrs Irving’s was Australia’s first published cookbook?’

NOTES

1. In this context we refer to published cookbooks; many Australians had penned or compiled ‘cookbooks’ for their own or others’ use.
2. Edward Abbott, *The English and* *Australian Cookery Book: Cookery for the Many, as well as the Upper Ten Thousand – by an Australian Aristologist* (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1864).
3. See Jacqueline Newling, Alison Vincent, Paul van Reyk, ‘Fern syrup, stewed eel and native currant jam: this 1843 recipe collection may be Australia’s earliest cookbook’, https://theconversation.com/fern-syrup-stewed-eel-and-native-currant-jam-this1843-recipe-collection-may-be-australias-earliest-cookbook-181789, published 27 April 2022.
4. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1843, p. 1.
5. *The Housewife’s Guide* is not listed in John Hoyle, *An Annotated Bibliography of Australian Domestic Cookery Books 1860s to 1950* (Sydney: Billycan Books, 2010) or John Alexander Ferguson, *Bibliography of Australia* (facsimile edition, Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1975–1977). Hoyle posits the first recipe book published and printed in Australia may have been *Ice, and Its Uses* (Adelaide: Sinnett & Co, 1860) (Hoyle, p. 339). Again, *The Housewife’s Guide* predates this publication by seventeen years.
6. All the details of Edmund Mason’s life before his arrival in Australia, and the quotes included here, are taken from Edmund Mason, *A sketch of my personal history,* accessed at https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Mason-9383?fbclid=IwAR3vju-t0GRWb0R-c6\_Dcma5U\_b0h-WJ34H9LgDfd6Cvt4TX4GxmIL4KHRk. While we have been able to verify some of the information provided here, attempts to contact the editors of this entry on WikiTree to establish the provenance of these biographical notes has, to date, been unsuccessful. Some of the details of Mason’s earlier life are corroborated in ‘A Representative of Old Parramatta’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrower’s Advocate,* 26 February 1898, p. 11, which also provides information on his life in Australia.
7. Persons on bounty ships (Agent’s Immigrant Lists), Mary Anne, 28 August 1840, pp. 41, 43. Museums of History NSW, State Archives Collection NRS5316/4/4787.https://indexes.records.nsw.gov.au/ebook/list. aspx?Page=NRS5316/4\_4787/Mary%20Anne\_28%20Aug%201840/4\_478700043. jpg&No=1 Accessed 20 January 2022.
8. *The Sun* was initially a daily and subsequently a weekly paper which ran to only 27 editions from 28 January 1843 to 27 May 1843.
9. Mason, *A sketch*.
10. ‘Death of an old resident’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1899, p. 5; ‘Death of Mr. Edmund Mason’, *The Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 4 November 1899, p. 11.
11. *Parramatta Chronicle* 13 July 1844, p. 3.
12. *The Conversation* article and subsequent media interviews elicited no further information on the book or its author.
13. At the 1841 Census there were only 1,393 permanent homes in the Parramatta Police District. ‘Parramatta History and Heritage’, City of Parramatta, https:// historyandheritage.cityofparramatta.nsw.gov.au/research-topics/councilhistory/1861-local-administration-in-parramatta. See also Carol Liston, ‘Sleepy Hollow 1840–1860’ in Terry Kass, Carol Liston, John McClymont, *Parramatta. A Past Revealed* (Parramatta: Parramatta City Council, 1996), pp. 133–178.
14. Deborah Irwin, *The Housewife’s Guide* (London: William Mason, 1830)Wellcome Collection, University of Leeds. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/uje5etww/ items?canvas=1
15. Barbara Santich puts forward several criteria by which a book could be considered an Australian cookery book. It should be written by an Australian, written specifically for Australians, reflect the cooking practices of Australians, and have enough local content as to make it recognisably Australian’ (Edward Abbott’s scrapbook, Proceedings of the XIth Symposium of Australian Gastronomy 1999, p. 109.
16. Parramatta Chronicle and Cumberland General Advertiser, 30 December 1843, p. 1.
17. Tim Low, ‘Foods of the First Fleet, convict foodplants of old Sydney Town’. *Australian Natural History,* Volume 22, No 7, Summer 1987–88, pp. 292–297, p. 294.
18. *The General Receipt Book.* William Mason’s edition can be accessed at https:// archive.org/details/generalreceiptbook00laug/mode/2up. For Edmund Masons’s edition see *Parramatta Chronicle and Cumberland Advertiser*, 17 February 1844, p. 1. A copy of the Australian edition is available at the State Library of New South Wales. Like *The Housewife’s Guide*, this book is not listed in either Hoyle or Ferguson. From the address given for Mason (Brickfield Hill, Sydney) it seems this book was also first published in 1843.