

Bill Harney's Cook Book. An Overlooked Australian Cookery Book

2024

*Bill Harney's Cook Book*¹ first published in 1960 is unique among Australian cookery books on two counts. First, it deals almost exclusively with recipes for cooking native animals and plants.² Second, it incorporates Northern Australian Indigenous food knowledge and practice. That it is in the genre of bush cooking recipes takes nothing away from its achievement.³

When I first bought the book I was expecting it to be a humorous collection of tales of Anglo Australians and 'bush tucker', native foods. The cover cartoon by "Vane" didn't make for any other first impression.⁴ It shows someone dressed as a bush camp cook – singlet, hat, apron and all - holding a dead snake which is about to be put into a kerosene tin of hot water heated by wood.

What I found instead was a book of recipes and commentary that dealt seriously with bush cooking, cooking native foods, and Indigenous Northern Australian's food practices. What humour there was came from Harney's recollections of bush cooks and failed bush cooking.

Hardy's bush food expertise

Bill Harney's varied experience, particularly in outback Australia, brought him into contact with Aborigines, Malays and Europeans all of whom taught him something of how to use our natural ingredients to the best advantage.⁵

Born in 1895, in his autobiography Harney described his life as 'a nomadic existence around the Northern Territory wandering from north to south, from east to west and once a year to the big city'.⁶ Much of it was spent in the company of Indigenous Northern Australians. In his autobiography he writes of cattle droving journeys accompanied by Indigenous families and of the native foods he ate and Indigenous foodways.⁷ He established a coastal trading business and learned how to gather and cure trepang – bêche-de-mer or sea cucumber.⁸ In 1927 he married Linda Beattie, a Waruwungu woman with whom he had two children. They lived in bush camps as Harney chased work, supplementing the meat rations from employers with bush foods.⁹ Beattie died in 1932 of tuberculosis as did one of the children in 1932.

He spent 1940 – 1948 working in the Australian Government's Native Affairs Branch as a Protector of Aborigines Patrol Officer.¹⁰ Harney's autobiography doesn't say whether he broadened his

¹ Harney, Bill with Thompson, Patricia *Bill Harney's Cook Book* Lansdowne Press 1960.

² There are recipes for Curried Mango Pickle, Fried Pawpaw, Pawpaw Mince Pudding and a Pawpaw Dessert

³ There was a pamphlet *Friendly fruits and vegetables* prepared by the General Staff L.H.Q. Australia and issued under the authority of the Commander Allied Land Forces S.W.P.A. 1943. I don't know its distribution but imagine it was only to servicemen. It does not constitute a cookery book in the sense this article uses the term.

⁴ There are seven cartoons like this in the book one of which is of an Indigenous Australian which no-one would publish these days.

⁵ Harney ...1960 back cover

⁶ 'Bill Harney. A Bushman's Life', Penguin 1990 p.208

⁷ Harney ... 1990 pp.60 - 66

⁸ Harney ... 1990 p.81

⁹ Harney ... 1990 p.102

¹⁰ The role of the Protector was contradictory. They were "to exercise a general supervision and care over all matters affecting the interest and welfare of Aborigines, and to protect them against injustice, imposition and fraud." It also allowed them to remove children that were deemed to be neglected, and this was very often the case'. [Protector of Aborigines - Wikipedia](#)

understanding of Indigenous foodways during this time, though he may well have. Following this 'I built a house (at Daramunkamani near Darwin) got some coconut trees, some cavendish bananas and some pawpaw and mango trees, and gradually got the place going.'¹¹ He described his meals for an average day: breakfast of turtle egg omelette and a pawpaw, lunch of fresh caught fish or a goose, dinner the remains of the goose and maybe banana fritters.¹² Harney lived there till 1959 when he was appointed as the first Ranger at Uluru (Ayer's Rock). He died in 1963.

The cook book

'Despite a life of constant movement and physical hard work, he was a prolific writer, with a deep-seated desire to reflect on his experiences'.¹³

The book is a slim volume of 89 pages with seven cartoons and a bush food menu (Appendix 1). Harney published 14 books in all, three "with" someone including the cook book. (Appendix 2 is the list of Harvey's books.) In her Foreword to the 1972 edition of the cook book collaborator and scribe Patricia Thompson says: 'This book was the result of long yarns with Bill about the natural foods of Australia and about old-style bush cooking. Bill talked – he was an incomparable talker – and I took it down in shorthand. At length, fourteen years ago a manuscript emerged, after much correspondence with "my old N.T. Cobber"'.¹⁴ Thompson and Ruth Lockwood held the copyright, but I have nothing to indicate that the text for the cook book was anything other than Harney's words albeit edited. I treat the cook book as Harney's.

The recipes

Cooking in the bush is, in its own way, a real art.¹⁵

The bulk of the book is Harney's recipes for native animals and a few other bush foods. There are 44 recipes: five for using damper dough; one for a sauce; two for rice; six for kangaroo; four for bandicoots; two for possums; four for cuts of meat; one for bush game birds; one for snake; two for flying foxes; one for the Nymphacea lily; one for the lotus lily; four for turtle; one for crabs; one for catfish; one for stingray; one for crocodile eggs; one for grilled fish; one for curried goose; one for tripe; one for curried mango pickle; three for pawpaw - fried, mince pudding, and a dessert. His recipe for Kangaroo Tail Soup is a good example of the recipes.

Kangaroo Tail Soup – Roast the tail in the ground oven or cut it into lengths .. and bake it in the camp oven, having first scraped off the hair. After baking for two to two and a half hours, the skin will come off easily. When the tail has been skinned, cut it into sections and coat it with flour. Put it into the cooking pot with water to cover, pepper and salt, a little butter or a portion of bacon, and cut up potatoes, carrots and onions. Let it simmer for 1 ½ hours, or until the meat starts to leave the bones.¹⁶

¹¹ Harney ... 1990 p.151

¹² Harney ... 1990 pp. 152- 153

¹³ Harney ... 1962, back cover biography.

¹⁴ Harney... 1960 p.7

¹⁵ Harney ... 1960 p.9

¹⁶ Harney ...1960 p.33

Harney is not afraid to give recipes that cooks and their diners might balk at.

Possum Pumpkin Pie - In the early days, possums were caught, cleaned and cut up, put into a hollowed-out pumpkin which was then roasted until the meat was cooked – a very tasty pie it was, too.¹⁷

Flying fox is a food *par excellence*. There is no preparation needed. You just throw them on the coals or on a big fire, burn the wings and cut the membrane off near the body. When the fire has burned down to smouldering coals, put the little foxes on the coals, cover them with more hot coals, and cook them, entrails and all.¹⁸

This is one of only two recipes for native plants, the recipe being unusual as he learned it from unspecified Chinese and not Indigenous locals.

Lotus Lily¹⁹ Soup – This is a recipe which I obtained from the Chinese. Take the roots, which are really tubers and clean and peel them thoroughly, as you would clean a potato. Wash them well, cut into two lengthwise, then chop into ½-inch strips. Wash them well again . Now slice 1 lb. of lean pork into a large saucepan. Mix a teaspoon of cornflour with 2 teaspoons of salt. Mix a teaspoon of Chinese soy sauce, a little pepper and a teaspoonful of salt. Cover with a quart of water and boil gently until the lily roots are tender.²⁰

With exceptions such as Murray Cod and Barramundi, fish and seafood have an ambiguous relationship to native foods often overlooked as such. Harney gives recipes for crab, stingray, sea turtles, and feather-tailed catfish.

Feather-tailed Catfish – These are freshwater fish, found in billabongs. They are cleaned out through the mouth, and the fat and air sac are put aside. The fat is now carefully put into the air sac, which is tied and replaced inside the fish. The gullet is then stuffed with a bit of grass or bush, and the fish is cooked under the ashes of the fire. It is then cleaned of ashes, split open, and the sac of fat broken over the flesh. This gives the fish a great flavour.²¹

The only spicing used in the recipes are pepper, salt, mustard and curry powder. An exception here is Harney's recipe for grilling steak which is rubbed with a combination of 'Chinese soy sauce, tomato sauce and Worcestershire sauce and some grated garlic'.

There are also short commentaries on the bush potato— a ground vine with edible tubers²²; witchetty grubs the larvae of the cossid moth²³; turtle eggs: and wild honey.

¹⁷ Harney ... 1960 p.35

¹⁸ Harney ... 1960 p.47

¹⁹ *Nelumbo nucifera*

²⁰ Harney ... 1960 p.80

²¹ Harney ... 1960 p.72. I have been unable to find an Australian Feather-tailed Catfish.

²² *Ipomoea costata*

²³ *Endoxyla leucomochla*

There are cooking tips throughout the book:

There is a proper way of carrying suet in the bush; you put it into the flour sack, so that it won't go sour. Similarly, if you are carrying tins of butter, you have to put the tins in with the corned beef, because in that way it will keep cool.²⁴

A shovel is very necessary, for digging a trench around the camp, or around the (tent) fly in case of heavy rain. In an emergency, what is more, you can grill a good steak on the blade of a shovel.²⁵

Cooking techniques

How tasty is food when it's cooked in the stones
In the ways of our fathers of old!
How tasty the flesh! How sweet are the bones!
So follow this way as it's told.
B.H.²⁶

The techniques for cooking are the usual – boiling, frying, grilling, steaming, and roasting and descriptions of them are also the usual. Harney listed the basic equipment a bush cook should have:

- 1 10 inch Bedourie camp oven²⁷
- 3 billy cans, with lids
- A kerosene tin, for boiling
- A good, strong, heavy-bottomed frying pan
- 2 saucepans
- 3 yards of No.10 wire to make wire hooks.²⁸
- A folding (meat) safe is also useful, as is a griller.

Most of this is easily translatable to a domestic kitchen's range of cooking equipment, there being no need for wire and the meat safe being replaced by the refrigerator..

When a camp oven is not available or is too small for what you want to cook Harney suggests using a ground oven - a pit of hot stones on which food to be cooked is placed then covered by leaves, and earth, like a Fijian *lovo* or Maori *hangī*.²⁹ He gives a long detailed description of how these are made – how deep to make the oven for different meats, what timber is best for the fire (quinine wood, gidgees and paper bark), what stones to use (granite is best, don't use flint), and what plant leaves to use (grevillea and red river gums).³⁰

²⁴ Harney ... 1960 p.11

²⁵ Harney ... 1960 p.86

²⁶ Each chapter begins with a food-related snippet from old bush ballads or poems credited to a B.H. which I imagine mean they are Harney's. There are several poems written by him in his autobiography.

²⁷ A camp stove is a large pot with lid that sits in the fire among the coals and sometimes has ashes put on the lid as well. Of the Bouderie he wrote: 'Bouderie ovens are made of steel, so that you could put a Bouderie on a packhorse and, if the horse bucked and threw its pack, the steel oven would not break as the old brittle cast-iron pots did'

²⁸ Harney ... 1960 p.85

²⁹ Harney ...1960 p.28

³⁰ Harney ...1960 pp.29 - 29

Of the ground oven Harney wrote:

... it is still true that our white man's method are such as to cause the loss of much goodness. The great chefs devised most elaborate methods to retain the juices and flavor of meat – an achievement which the natives of Australia mastered long ago in their simple ground oven.³¹

Indigenous food practice

One of the most significant aspects of the book is Hardy's inclusion and valorisation of Indigenous food practices. He describes how Indigenous Northern Australians prepared dugong, the Nymphaea lily, turtle, goanna and goose³²:

To cook the bird in a ground oven, you might try the following method, which has been adopted by white people who have mixed with the Waddaman tribe: Gather lemon grass and soak it in water.³³ When the ground oven is ready, hot stones are put into wet lemon grass and all then is put inside the split bird. The bird is folded over again, tied up and put on the steaming leaves of the ground oven in the usual way. Vegetables can be put with it, if desired. Cover in the way I have already described, and leave it for about ¾ of an hour, or perhaps a little longer, according to the size of the bird. The bird is most delicious to eat, with the lemon flavour inside and gumleaf flavour in the crisp skin.³⁴

This is a good example of how Harney described Indigenous Australians' food practices as straightforwardly as his own recipes. There is nothing exotic, quaint, judgemental or derisory in his descriptions.

It's the only time Harney identifies from which Indigenous group 'white people' learned an Indigenous cooking practice. At other times he is not specific but acknowledges the learning. After giving his recipe for damper³⁵ he wrote:

As supplies of flour ran low, station hands and bushmen fell back on native food. They learned – how to grind up the nuts of the cycad palm for flour ... The natives call the nuts of the cycad palm Munja or Nargueamma, and they like to make big cakes out of the flour at least 3in.thick.³⁶

Harney's book in the context of other published material

There have been recipes for native animals in Australian cookery books since the earliest extant cookery book - Edward Abbotts 1864 cookery book *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*.^{37 38} However, no cookery books were devoted

³¹ Harney ...1960 p.40

³² Probably the Magpie Goose *Anseranas semipalmata*

³³ Probably the Australian native lemon grass *Cymbopogon ambiguus*.

³⁴ Harney ... 1960 p.32

³⁵ A staple of bush cooking made with flour and water and baked on the coals.

³⁶ Harney ...1960 p.19

³⁷ Abbott, Edward, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*.³⁷ 1864

³⁸ See for example, Rawson, Mrs. Lance (Mina) *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, William Hopkins, Rockhampton, 1890; Maclurcan, Hannah, *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia*, George Robertson and Company, Melbourne, 1898; The Lady Victoria Buxton Girls' Club Adelaide, *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, South Australia, E.W. Cole, 1911; Wylie, Margaret A, Yewers, Mabel E, Reeves, Margaret H, Gray, Doris S, McKinnon, Maria A, *The Golden Wattle Cookery Book*, E. S.

entirely to native animals and plants. None had recipes for the range of native animals Harney did, limiting themselves to kangaroos, wallabies, and birds (pigeon, parrot, wild duck). None dealt with Indigenous food knowledge and cooking practices in any depth. Mrs Rawson is something of an exception to this. In *The Antipodean Cookery Book* she does acknowledge her learning from Indigenous people: 'Speaking personally, I am beholden to the blacks for nearly all my knowledge of the different edible ground game, recipes for the cooking of which have been given in this and my other works on cookery.'³⁹ (Appendix 2 is the list of books reviewed)

As with cookery books so also with native animal recipes published in newspapers.^{40 41} The exception was recipes sent in by entrants in the *Western Mail's Bush Recipes Competition* in 1938. Twenty recipes were published mostly for kangaroo (there were three recipes for possum and two for emu).⁴²

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Concluding remarks

By the time he came to write this, Harney had already published *Tales from the Aborigines*, a collection of Indigenous legends, and six other books. (Appendix 2 is the full list of Harney's published books). I don't know but will guess that Harney wanted the book to reach more than his established readership and not only those interested in bush cooking. Exhibit one: the book is called a *Cook Book* and not a *Bush Cook Book*. Exhibit two: Harney's recipe for Baked Kangaroo Tail calls first for the tail pieces to be baked in a *hot oven*, not a *camp oven* which suggests a domestic kitchen, but also suggests baking it in the ashes of a fire.⁴⁶ Exhibit three: having described how to make a ground oven in the bush he describes making one in a suburban garden with a hole 18 inches long, 9 inches deep and 12 in. wide, some heated stones, leaves and a sheet of galvanised iron.⁴⁷

The book went through two editions – 1960 and 1972, and three re-prints of the 1972 edition - 1975, 1976, 1980 suggesting that it reached a broad audience.

Wigg & Son Pty Ltd 1926; *W.M.U. Cookery Book, Every One A Tried Recipe*, 1944; *The Schauer Australian cookery book*, Amy Schauer, 1956

³⁹ The natives call the nuts of the cycad palm *Munja* or *Narguemma*, and they like to make, Mrs. Lance (Mina) Rawson *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion* George Robertson and Company p.54

⁴⁰ See for example 'Bush Cookery' *Sydney Punch* 20 November 1869 p.4; 'Native Cookery', *Life and Lore of the Bush Sun* 8 January 1922 p.14; 'Food from the Bush', *The Northern Miner* 14 January 1944; 'Snake and Yam Better Than Station Tucker', *The Daily News* 21 January 1954 p.13

⁴¹ All newspapers were accessed via *Trove*, the digital depository of all newspapers, magazines and journals in Australia.

⁴² 'Bush Recipes Competition' *Western Mail* 7 April 1938 p.40 and *Western Mail* 14 April 1938 p.33

⁴³ See for example 'Bush Cookery' *Sydney Punch* 20 November 1869 p.4; 'Native Cookery', *Life and Lore of the Bush Sun* 8 January 1922 p.14; 'Food from the Bush', *The Northern Miner* 14 January 1944; 'Snake and Yam Better Than Station Tucker', *The Daily News* 21 January 1954 p.13

⁴⁴ All newspapers were accessed via *Trove*, the digital depository of all newspapers, magazines and journals in Australia.

⁴⁵ 'Bush Recipes Competition' *Western Mail* 7 April 1938 p.40 and *Western Mail* 14 April 1938 p.33

⁴⁶ 'Baked Kangaroo Tail', Harney... 1960 p.33

⁴⁷ Harney... 1960 p.43

Yet the book has been overlooked in discussions of cookery books in Australia, particularly in discussions about native foods in cookery books. I hope that this article changes that.

My thanks to Jacqueline Newling for providing valuable comments on a draft of this article and to Alison Vincent for tracking down the Services pamphlet

Appendix 1
Bush Food Menu

Two-Feller Creek Hotel
Menu

Appetizer. Pate de Foie Stingray

Soup. Turtle, ladled from Greenback Shell

Entrée. Witchety Grub au Natural
Witchetty Grub Kebab
Baked Goanna Eggs

Dinner. Roast Flying Fox
Haunch of Stuffed Kangaroo Leg

Desert. Honey Ants
Mulga Nut Cake
Mulga Apples

Vin du Pays

Appendix 2. Harney's Published Works

Taboo 1943

North of 23° 1946

Brimming Billabongs 1947

Songs of the Songmen (with Professor A. P. Elkin) 1949

Life Among the Aborigines 1957

Content to Lie in the Sun 1958

Tales from the Aborigines 1959

Bill Harney's Cook Book (with Patricia Thompson) 1960

Ritual and Behaviour at Ayres Rock (1960)

The Story of Ayers Rock 1960

The Significance of Ayres Rock to the Aborigines 1960

Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines 1961

To Ayres Rock and Beyond 1963

The Shady Tree (with Douglas Lockwood) 1963

Appendix 3

Australian Cookery Books Reviewed (in calendar order)

Edward Abbott, *The English and Australian Cookery Book. Cookery for the Many As Well the "Upper Ten Thousand"*, 1864

Mrs. Lance (Mina) Rawson, *The Queensland Cookery and Poultry Book*, 1890

Mrs. Lance (Mina) Rawson, *The Antipodean Cookery Book and Kitchen Companion*, 1895

Hannah Maclurcan, *Mrs Maclurcan's Cookery Book. A collection of practical recipes specially suited for Australia*, 1898

The Lady Victoria Buxton Girls' Club Adelaide, *The Kookaburra Cookery Book*, 1911

Margaret A. Wylie, Mabel E. Yewers, Margaret H. Reeves, Doris S. Gray, Maria A. McKinnon, *The Golden Wattle Cookery Book*, 1926

Women's Methodist Union, *W.M.U. Cookery Book, Every One A Tried Recipe*, 1944

Wynwode Reid (ed.), *New Australian Cookery Illustrated* 1950

Marrickville Margarine, *Pilot Recipe Book*, 1952

Amy Schauer, *The Schauer Australian cookery book*, 1956

Jean Fletcher (ed.) *An Australian Guide to Homestead Fare, J. B. Studio Production (196?)*

The Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy, *Household Cookery, Revised* 1960