

COMMENTARY

Should we safeguard 'the idea of the Anzac biscuit recipe'?

JOANNA COBLEY

Abstract

The culinary icon the Anzac biscuit and 'the idea of the recipe' blends mythology with historical truths on both sides of the Tasman. Australasian women collectively created the recipe in the early decades of the twentieth century. Then, as writers and readers of cookery books or as mothers, 'the keeper of the hearth', women transmitted the recipe in addition to messages about nutrition, housewifery, and patriotism. These messages were strongest throughout the inter-war years, World War II, and the Cold War Era until the 1970s. Approximately two hundred cookery books published from the 1930s to the 1990s provide our window into New Zealand's home baking traditions. Community fundraising cookery books transmitted the recipe the most, followed by those promoting kitchen appliances. Beyond cookery books, the biscuit featured in children's literature, a political cartoon, food memorials, and national war museum websites. It was invented to help 'the people' grieve and commemorate World War I and is now deeply embedded within Australasia's intangible cultural heritage; ought we safeguard 'the idea of the recipe' and add it to the UNESCO world list of intangible cultural heritage?

Keywords

Intangible cultural heritage, invented traditions, cookery books, Anzac biscuit recipe, home baking

Introduction

In "Anzac biscuits – A culinary memorial" for the *Journal of Australian Studies*, Sian Supski (2006) argues that the recipe 'filled a gap in the birth of the nation narrative' (p. 52). Supski built on the work of Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath & Quartly (1994), who wrote in women's contributions and experiences to counterbalance the dominant masculinist trope of nation building pervading White Australian history.

This commentary serves as an open letter to the Australasian sisterhood, suggesting they consider adding 'the idea of the Anzac biscuit recipe' to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) intangible cultural heritage list (UNESCO, n.d. a). It is hoped *Women's Studies Journal* readers will advance the conversation at a kitchen, regional, or national level and share their views.

This commentary has three parts. First, I define intangible cultural heritage and reveal connections between regional or national foods and national memory projects (UNESCO, n.d. e). Because of a lack of documented evidence in food history, Andrew Smith (2001) points to 'culinary fakelores' and 'logical fallacies' embedded in the 'origin narratives' of national foods (pp. 254–258).¹ Next, I examine the recipe's transference through cookery books. Cookery books, in Janet Theophano's view, 'arouse the mind's sensory palate' (2002, p. 2). Cookery books also provide clues into women's lives (Scott, 1997); other womanly historical documents include samplers and scrapbooks (Bower, 1997). Using the Anzac biscuit recipe as a case study, I look at the 'women's culture' behind cookery books, focusing on messages

about patriotism, food, and gender. The third component looks at the Anzac biscuit culture in everyday life in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Understanding intangible cultural heritage, and the legacy of the Anzac biscuit recipe

Intangible cultural heritage includes folklore, song, drama, festivals, and cuisine. UNESCO provides guidelines on how to safeguard intangible cultural heritage and manages the list of 'elements [that] cannot ... survive without immediate safeguarding' (UNESCO, n.d. d). Food-related examples include the French gastronomic meal (UNESCO, n.d. b) and gingerbread craft from Northern Croatia (UNESCO, n.d. c), both listed in 2010.

Intangible culture cannot exist without recognition. We must decide for ourselves whether the 'idea of the Anzac biscuit recipe', which includes both the transmission of baking knowledge and skills and the act of eating the biscuit, needs safeguarding.

First, we must consider the connection between intangible cultural heritage and national memory projects. According to Charles Lindholm (2008), citizens experience 'a secular communion' with the nation by ingesting its 'authentic' food (p. 87). In the case of the Anzac biscuit, Supski (2006) sees significance in their role in the commemoration of Anzac Day, giving the biscuit a 'civil-religious' resonance, and that through the social act of 'eating the biscuits, one "belongs" in and to the Australian nation' (p. 58). The biscuit is sold commercially and for fundraising purposes, and the Returned Soldiers' Association (RSA) in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the Returned Services League (RSL) in Australia serve as 'protectors of the authentic biscuit' (Supski, 2006, p. 55).²

Smith (2001) warns that 'invented culinary traditions' (p. 258) rather than documented evidence surround authentic foods (see also Holtzman, 2006). The Anzac biscuit recipe creation story combines culinary fakelores with historical truths on both sides of the Tasman. The New Zealand National Army Museum (Te Mata Toa) website (<http://www.armymuseum.co.nz/>) debunks the most seductive origin narrative: that the soldiers made Anzac biscuits at Gallipoli. Soldiers' rations at that time did not include golden syrup or coconut, quintessential Anzac biscuit ingredients. The logical fallacy draws on rational connections not supported by historical evidence (Smith, 2001). Te Mata Toa's webpage corrects the fallacy with a truth. Called 'the ship's ANZAC biscuit', the standard New Zealand Army biscuit was 'a rock hard tooth breaker' (National Army Museum Te Mata Toa, n.d.); the Australian Army called their biscuits 'Anzac wafers' or 'Anzac tiles' (Australian War Memorial, n.d.).

A second logical fallacy centred on the comfort packages that women sent to the war front during World War I (WWI), which contained medicines, knitted comforts, and food (Coney, 1993; Pickles, 2002). Te Mata Toa's website notes that packages may have contained a nutritious rolled oat biscuit; no evidence has emerged to support them as Anzac biscuits.³ Given the duration of the voyage, coconut would most likely have gone rancid. These creation mythologies show the recipe's nostalgic significance, and – rather than debunk the culinary fakelores – food historians, teachers, and the media in Australasia have used the power behind the idea of the recipe to pass on a cooking tradition and honour women of the past.

Raey Tannahill (1975) linked the Anzac biscuit to Scotland's ancient flatbread – the oatcake – as Australasian culinary traditions developed from a 'British parent tradition' (see also Gollan, 1978; Leach, 2008, 2010; Symons, 2008, 2010; Veart, 2008). Leach (2008) argues that, over time, the culinary borrowings adapted and adjusted to the local environment. Symons (2008) claims that Australians and New Zealanders had a 'greater enthusiasm' for baking biscuits and

cakes than did ‘their British counterparts’ (p. 32).

Tracing the trajectory of the Anzac biscuit, Leach (2014) observed that the name ‘Anzac pudding’ or ‘Anzac cakes’ (p. 39) first entered community cookery books in 1915; however, the recipe emerged out of a ‘category of biscuit usually known as Rolled Oats Crispies or Biscuits that appeared just before WWI’ (Leach, 2008, p. 164). The recipe itself has undergone several changes since its debut as the ‘Anzac Crispie’ in the 8th edition of the *St Andrew’s cookery book*, published in Dunedin in 1919 (H. Leach, personal communication, April 22, 2015). On the whole, the Anzac biscuit recipe is best seen as a social invention that spontaneously emerged from rural and urban kitchens (Symons, 2006, 2008, 2010): women would have had similar ingredients and cooking technology in their homes, and recipe ideas flowed through people, time, and geographical space (Leach, 2006, 2008).

Cookery books as ‘the literature of the kitchen’: reading Anzac biscuit recipes

Through cookery books, we can trace changes in food fashions (Floyd & Forster, 2003; Morris, 2013) and cooking technology (Leach, 2014) and follow the evolution of a nation’s culinary heritage (Iacovetta, Korinek, & Epp, 2012; Leach, 2008, 2010; Symons, 2008, 2010). Up until the 1970s, ‘the literature of the kitchen’ delivered gendered messages (Theophano, 2002). Cookery books enlisted their women readers to serve the nation by feeding their husbands, children, and the community (Forster, 2003). Scott (1997) highlights how cookery books also enabled women to cross the public/private sphere divide; professional cookery teachers and/or demonstrators, public health officials, or experienced maternal figureheads vested in serving the community authored these books

Using the Anzac biscuit recipe as a case study, we expose the ‘women’s culture’ behind select cookery books most illustrative of the era, and highlight messages about patriotism, food, and gender. The data set comprised just over two hundred cookery books from a private collection published primarily in Aotearoa/New Zealand between the 1930s and 1990s and donated to the Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury.

The books discussed include cookery books promoting kitchen appliances, community fundraising books, and commercial books compiled by experts. Although many of the books had no publication date, ‘internal clues’ (Leach & Inglis, 2006, p. 71) such as design style, font, paper size and quality, illustrations, photographs, recipe style, weights and measurements, ingredients, and the price of the book provided hints.

Economic depression and post-war recovery shaped the 1920s and 1930s. Nevertheless, modernity entered the kitchen in the form of electric and gas cookers, and stove manufacturing companies produced cookery books and hired demonstrators to teach customers how to use the new technology (Leach, 2014). *Cookery* (Finlay, c1934) has illustrations, diagrams, and messages promoting the ‘benefits of cooking with gas’ (Figure 1). Finlay obtained a cookery diploma from the City & Guilds Institute, London, and was a home science teacher before becoming a ‘lady demonstrator’ for the Dunedin Gas Department.

The front cover of *Cookery* reveals a young urban woman wearing a polka dot dress covered with a fitted apron. Her hair is tied back in a headscarf, and her skin is white. She is contained in a modern kitchen (c1934).

A home science qualification offered a number of career options for the twentieth-century New Zealand woman – homemaker, cooking demonstrator, teacher, or nutritional expert – it was her patriotic duty to develop modern cooking knowledge and share these skills (Collins,

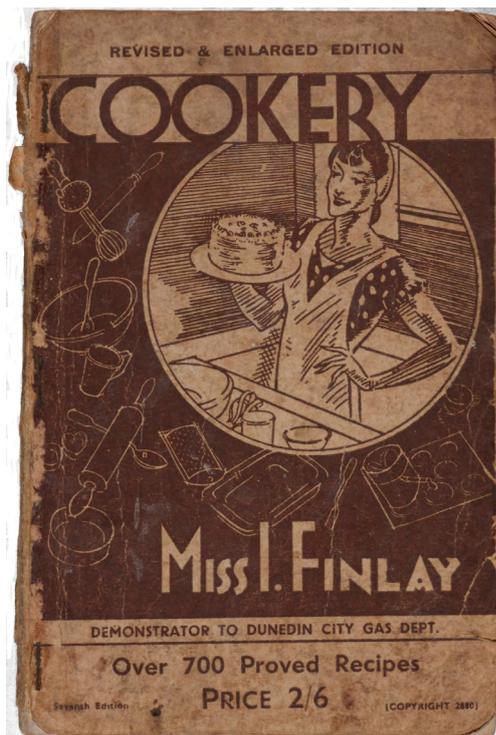


Figure 1: *Cookery*, front cover

2008; Coney, 1993; Inglis, 2010; Mitchell, 2006).

Eugenic ideologies influenced the national agenda in the 1930s; strong nations needed healthy children. The introduction to *Cookery* has a section dedicated to 'diet in relation to health', Finlay (c1934) cautions that 'an excess of sweets and highly refined foods will naturally bring trouble of some kind', and she encourages cooks to use 'whole grains' and 'raw sugar' (p. 9). Indicative of Aotearoa/New Zealand's enthusiasm for baking, the Anzac biscuit recipe appears twice. To the contemporary reader, the recipe below may look like a 'health biscuit'.

No. 578.—*Anzac Biscuits*, No. 1

Ingredients:— 1 Br. cup of wheatmeal; 1 Br. cup cocoanut; $\frac{3}{4}$ Br. cup Flour or Bran; $\frac{3}{4}$ Br. cup light brown sugar; $\frac{3}{4}$ Br. cup walnuts; $\frac{1}{4}$ lb Butter; 1 Tablespoon syrup; 2 Tablespoons water; $\frac{1}{2}$ -Teaspoon B. Soda; $\frac{1}{4}$ -Teaspoon B. Powder; Pinch of salt.

Method:— Mix dry ingredients. Melt syrup and butter with water and soda added and stir into the dry mixture. Place spoonfuls on cold, greased trays. Bake 15 to 20 minutes. Will make 36 to 40 biscuits.

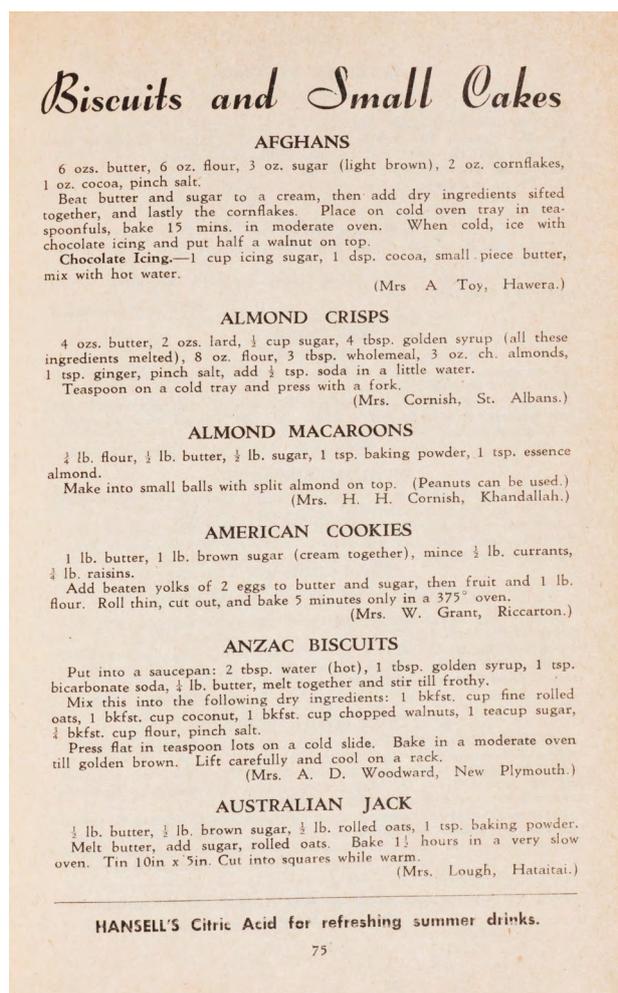
Fewer cookery books emerged during World War II (WWII) (Leach & Inglis 2006). Those published included official recipe books promoting food values. Food rationing shaped home cooking. Women either reduced the amount of sugar in their baking or used substitutes such as golden syrup and treacle. Butter was also restricted yet generous compared with allowances in other countries (Leach, 2014).

The Anzac biscuit recipe materialised in the *New Zealand Truth's cookery book* (1948 revised edition). It was a popular book for the period, and Leach and Inglis (2006) refer to it as a 'famous series' (p. 76).⁴ The front cover reassures the reader that 'experts' had compiled the 600 recipes. Commercialism fuses with messages about patriotism, nutrition, and gender in *New Zealand Truth's cookery book* (1948). In the foreword, Dr Muriel Bell, Nutritionist to the Department of Health, advocated that good nutrition 'improved citizens' and 'created strong nations' (p. iii). To Bell, 'good housewifery' meant having the ability to serve attractive, 'simple and inexpensive foods that promoted good health' (p. iii). The table of contents lists recipes for 'diabetics and invalids', and 'eggless, butterless recipes' focus on economics; other sections are dedicated to baking (pp. vi–xi). The Anzac biscuit recipe promotes nutrition – requiring wholemeal flour and walnuts – and efficiency, yielding '50 biscuits at the cost of 1/-' (p. 111).

Another famous series, the *League of Mothers, 1926–1951 cookery book and household hints* (1955), first published in 1951, followed a gendered citizenship model. The League saw themselves as women helping the nation. The inside cover features a 'recipe for brides: Mix love, good looks and sweet temper into a well-furnished house. Add a blunder of faults and self-forgetfulness, stir in pounded wit, dry humour, and sweet argument, pour in gently rippling laughter, and common sense and bake well until eternity'.

The League promoted the ideal of the happy home with the woman at the centre. Patriotism is evident, with Mrs A. D. Woodward of New Plymouth's Anzac biscuit recipe appearing on page 75 flanked by her Cold War allies: American Cookies and Australian Jack (Figure 2). American, New Zealand, and Australian food historians all point to a strong 'butter and sugar'

Figure 2: Biscuits & small cakes



baking culture. (League of Mothers, 1955, p. 75).

Research on Māori women who migrated to the city between WWII and the 1960s shows there were expectations to conform to European ideals of domesticity (Woods, 2002), or at least experiment with cooking 'Pakeha kai' (Williams 2015, p. 157). Māori women followed recipes from magazines and the *Edmonds 'sure to rise' cookery book*, another famous series. The Macmillan Brown Library collection holds the 7th edition of the *Edmonds 'sure to rise' cookery book*, which was published in 1939 and included the Anzac biscuit recipe.

The number of fundraising cookery books published by local community groups escalated in the 1970s and peaked in the 1980s (Leach & Inglis, 2006).⁵ A simplified Anzac biscuit recipe emerged that used refined sugar and flour. Examples include Helen Sim's contribution to the *Canterbury cook book* for the Girl Guides Association, Canterbury Province (1984, p. 84):

Anzac Biscuits

Ingredients: 1 cup rolled oats; 1 cup flour; 1 cup sugar; 1 cup coconut; 125g butter, 1 Tbsp golden syrup; 1 tsp baking soda; 2 Tbsp hot water

Melt butter and syrup together, add soda dissolved in hot water. Pour into dry ingredients. Flatten lightly on tray. Bake for 10 minutes at 180° C (350° F).

The Anzac biscuit recipe consistently materialised in cookery books promoting kitchen appliances, which, Leach (2008) argues, tended to reflect the innovations occurring in the home kitchen. The *Prestcold kitchen companion* (Smith, 1984) contained general instructions about freezer technology as well as a page dedicated to explaining metrics, introduced to New Zealand in 1972. *Prestcold's* (Smith, 1984) Anzac recipe makes 100 biscuits and instructs readers to 'eat some now and freeze some for a few weeks ahead' (p. 56). The number of cookery books dropped in the 1990s as recipes were increasingly transmitted via the Internet. Over all decades, community-focused cookery books transmitted the Anzac biscuit recipe the most.

The Anzac biscuit as a living culture

The Anzac biscuit exists beyond national memory projects and cookery books. This section looks at three benefits associated with preserving intangible cultural heritage in accordance with UNESCO guidelines.

First, recognising and understanding intangible cultural heritage as a form of social practice helps maintain cultural diversity in an increasingly globalised world (UNESCO, n.d. e). A political cartoon by Michael Moreu, published in *The Press* on March 14, 2007, for example,

demonstrates the pervasive link connecting patriotism to the social practice of baking the Anzac biscuit. The cook is Dr Davis, the ‘house husband’ of the then Prime Minister, Helen Clark. Davis says, ‘The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, so I’m baking President Bush some ANZAC biscuits.’ Clark, the all-knowing maternal figurehead, replies, ‘I know what he’s interested in, Peter – better make them Afghans’ (Moreu, 2007). In 2007, the allied forces engaged in a ‘war on terror’ in Afghanistan. The cartoon fuses cultural diversity and international diplomacy via cornflakes, an essential afghan biscuit ingredient and an American invention.

Second, the power ‘of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next’ (UNESCO, n.d. e). Transmitting the ‘idea of the Anzac biscuit recipe’ to children through storytelling reinforces home baking as an important social practice in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Peter Millett appropriates *The gingerbread man*, the popular nineteenth-century children’s runaway food story, in *The Anzac biscuit man* (2007). The little old woman decorates the Anzac biscuit man with jaffas for the eyes and hokey-pokey nuggets for the shirt button, whilst the little old man watches and appreciates her skills. Millett uses kiwi expressions such as ‘the oven’s hotter than a hāngi’ (p. 42) and also borrows from a Norwegian children’s story where a pig, rather than a fox, transports the runaway food across the river (Rhodes, 2011). The stories end in the same way: the Norwegian pig eats the runaway pancake, and Millett’s cunning kunekune pig ‘gobbles’ the Anzac biscuit man (Millett, 2007, p. 50).

The third benefit lies in the cultural exchanges that manifest from sharing the cultural tradition. Aotearoa/New Zealand artist Kingsley Baird’s poignant soldier biscuit art installations, *Serve: A new recipe for sacrifice* in the National Army Museum Te Mata Toa, Waiouru, New Zealand (Baird, 2010–11), *Tomb* in the Historial de la Grande Guerre, Péronne, France (Baird, 2013), and *Stela* in the Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr, Dresden, Germany (Baird, 2014a), invite conversation about sacrifice, grief, and remembering the dead (Baird, 2014b). Made from the Anzac biscuit recipe, some soldier biscuits had ‘complete’ bodies, others maimed. Baird re-enacts the Eucharist by summoning Dresden viewers to eat one of the 18,000 ‘Kiwi Christ’ memorial biscuits.⁶ Transmitting the recipe was part of the *Serve* ritual at Te Mata Toa.

Collectively Moreu, Millett, and Baird demonstrate how people – men, women and children – keep intangible cultural heritage traditions alive.

Conclusions

Cookery books, museum websites, a ‘runaway food’ story, a political cartoon, and food sculptures have all transferred the ‘idea of the Anzac biscuit recipe’. It lives. Aotearoa/ New Zealand cookery books published from the 1930s until the 1990s exposed a strong women’s culture. Patriotic maternal figureheads disseminated recipes and household advice based on scientific research. The woman’s primary purpose included homemaker or nutritional expert working for the public good. These values permeated until at least the 1970s. The Anzac biscuit recipe prevailed in community fundraising cookery books and books promoting kitchen appliances. The books I investigated pointed to the cultural significance of home baking rather than the origin moment of the recipe.

Seductive food fakelores surround the recipe; the mystique and intrigue are more alluring than historical facts. The real power lies in the ‘idea of the recipe’ and the social practices surrounding the transmission of the skills and knowledge associated with making and eating

Anzac biscuits.⁷ Adding the recipe to the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list will acknowledge the historic and ongoing importance of women's creativity and resourcefulness in the kitchen, particularly the community-driven women behind the fundraising cookery books published during WWI (Leach, 2014).

JOANNA COBLEY specialises in how people interact with cultural heritage. She has worked as a museum educator at Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, and has been the director of a heritage park, museum, and kiwi house. From 2012 to 2016, she taught history at the University of Canterbury.

Notes

- 1 Supski (2006) describes the origin of the Anzac biscuit as 'apocryphal' (p. 53).
- 2 Using golden syrup rather than eggs binds the Anzac biscuit ingredients and distinguishes it from cookie dough.
- 3 Māori and Cook Island soldiers serving in Egypt received specific food comforts such as tīfī, a preserved salted sea bird, also worth considering for UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list; see Coney (1993) and Lyver, Newman, & the Rakiura Tīfī Islands Administering Body (2012).
- 4 'Famous series' cookery books include those of Aunt Daisy, Una Carter, and the League of Mothers, and Alison Holst's *Kitchen diary* (Leach & Inglis, 2006).
- 5 The cookery books examined at the Macmillan Brown Library reflected the same trend; 12 (37.5%) of the 32 books published in the 1970s, and 36 (50%) of the 71 published in the 1980s, were community cookery books.
- 6 Belich (2001) evocatively describes New Zealand's WWI casualties as '18,000 Kiwi Christs' (p. 116).
- 7 Helen Leach emphasised this point (personal communication, April 22, 2015).

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