

LIST I

HIU34077/78. Food, Bodies and Identities in Early Modern Britain and Ireland (Susan Flavin)



Joachim Wtewael, *The Kitchen Maid* (c. 1620)

Food is essential to life. This is not just because it sustains us physically, but because it is central to the expression of human identity. While historians have been quite slow to engage with this field of study, recent work has uncovered the deep, complex significance of food in the past, the way that meanings were developed through practices like fasting, cooking, gift exchange and commensality, and how those meanings relate to categories such as social status, race, gender, religion and nationhood. As Christopher Kissane has observed, food is no longer an 'insular historical subgenre' but a 'subject that sits at the heart of historical study and spreads right through its breadth'.

The early modern period has proven particularly interesting. The transformations sweeping the world led to great changes in both what people ate and drank and how they thought about it. Expanding trade forged new patterns of food consumption. Much of that trade developed through the colonial enterprises of European powers, which were connected to the formation of nation states and solidifying ideas of national and racial superiority. These hardening conceptions of difference were vividly expressed through food. Taking advantage of a burgeoning culture of printed texts, writers

engaged in vigorous debates about what and how people should eat, informed by the rediscovery of classical understandings of food, health, and the body and the fiery intellectual tradition of humanism. Theologians weighed in too. Food was central to the lived religion of early modern people and the turmoil of the Reformation generated fierce discussions about the spiritual meaning of food and even altered mundane patterns of consumption. Food was also vital to gender interactions and ideologies. A cult of domesticity emerging in the sixteenth century placed huge emphasis on the kitchen as a site of the emerging national identity. At the same time, men and women used the rituals of eating, and especially drinking, to express evolving ideas around sociability and good fellowship. Using food as a lens then, provides a dynamic way to understand the complexities of early modern society in a period of immense change.

This module immerses students in the world of early modern food. In Michaelmas term, students will engage with core concepts and themes in the historiography, both in relation to changing patterns of consumption and the 'meanings' of food in society. In Hilary term, we will adopt a more 'hands on' approach. Taking advantage of the remarkable local resources available to food historians, workshops will be held at venues including the National Gallery (visual sources), the Museum of Decorative Arts (material culture), the National Library and special collections at Trinity College Dublin (manuscript recipe books), as well as an archaeology laboratory at UCD (archaeobotanical). At these venues, students will learn to explore and connect diverse approaches to food history, think about interdisciplinarity and even try out some practice-based work by recreating various recipes. Although the primary focus of the module is England and Ireland, the experience of these countries will be considered comparatively, and in the context of wider global developments.