2002

Charleston Conference Call for Papers

Editor

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Barbara Haber Interview
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Whether or not they had been sincere in their conversion, they still clung to their cultural customs and were passing down the culture. I believed from the first that women and food were connected in age-old ways and that important history could be unlocked by pursuing those themes.

ATG: I really enjoyed reading your book and I feel that it breaks new ground in the field by linking social history with culinary history in a broader view of the subject. There is a theme of food as a way of connecting with the land and with other people that runs through the book. There is also a theme that shows how various cultures have used food as a means of celebration, especially in times of adversity. How did you come to write about this theme?

BH: I had thrown myself into that first conference paper and subsequent ones, with the vague idea that someday I would write a book.

In finding my topics for the book, I read widely in areas that interested me. I held the conviction that any period of history could yield interesting stories and to prove this I went to the literature on the Civil War. No period has been more closely mined, yet I was able to say something about women's roles as nurses in both the North and the South where they worked in diet kitchens. The edical establishment believed that whiskey held healing properties, so barrels of whiskey were part of the supplies, but male staff members tried to steal them. One Southern nurse, Phoebe Pember, had to guard them with a shotgun. Not our usual sense of what nursing is all about.

ATG: What are some of your favorite anecdotes from the book?

BH: I very much enjoyed writing about Henrietta Nesbitt, who had been the White House housekeeper during the FDR administration. She was notorious for serving bad food and I was eager to get to the bottom of what seemed to me a good story. Why was she allowed to be in charge in spite of great criticism, especially from the president. The key to the mystery turned out to be a friendship she had with Eleanor Roosevelt who had given Mrs. Nesbitt a job when she needed it and in return received great loyalty.

ATG: You use food history to explore neglected areas of women's history and ethnic history. Could you tell us more about your interest in this field?

BH: My interest in writing about such periods of our history is to dignify food history and especially to bring to light the importance of cookbooks as social documents. I use them throughout my book.

ATG: Have we finally moved beyond the academic taboo of talking about women's history and food history as linked in a special way?

BH: Here comes your academic question. The way I see it, women, kitchens and cookbooks have traditionally been seen as trivial and unimportant. Certainly male historians have always thought so and historians of women picked up on that prejudice in the interest of bringing to light the "important" accomplishments of women. Serious writing about women and food focused on eating disorders, the self-abuse women would inflict on themselves because of their frustrations over social disadvantages. Only recently have feminists been making the connections between women and food in a positive way. And the academy is beginning to recognize the important place of food in history. What has not yet happened is an appropriate awareness that food is a large, interdisciplinary subject that requires nontraditional research. I am waiting for scholars to understand the importance of cookbooks.

ATG: Culinary history cuts across so many fields: health, social history, art, agriculture, economics, entertainment. How do you draw the line as to what to collect?

BH: As to what to collect. We are focused on cookbooks and new scholarship on the history of food. As our resources expand, I also am buying out-of-print books on the history of agriculture, works in archaeology and other such things, not with the intention of building a comprehensive collection, but in bringing in some classics that contain great notes and bibliographies so that scholars get some good help if they need to use other libraries to pursue various interdisciplinary topics.

ATG: Why do you think there has been such an explosion of interest in food and food history in the last few years?

BH: Why is this surge of interest happening now? I can perhaps best speak for women's history by pointing out that historians of women have been saying right along that women are not one big monolithic group but have important demographic and cultural differences. People are beginning to recognize that by tracing foodways, one can get to the heart of these differences.

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2002 Charleston Conference - Issues in Book and Serial Acquisition

Call For Papers, Ideas, Conference Themes, Panels, Debates, Diatribes, Speakers, Preconferences, etc...

College of Charleston, Lightsey Center, 160 Calhoun St., Charleston, SC 29424
Wednesday, October 30, 2002 — Preconferences
Thursday-Saturday, October 31 - November 2, 2002 — Main Conference

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Send ideas by June 30, 2002, to any of the Conference Directors listed above.

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