[Global Histories]
A student journal

Review: Reaktion Books' Edible Series, edited by Andrew F. Smith – "Rice: A Global History" by Renee Marton; "Herring: A Global History" by Kathy Hunt

Author: Maximilian Vogel

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2018.202

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 4, No. 1 (May 2018), pp. 181–183
ISSN: 2366-780X

Publisher information:
'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:
For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

Reaktion Books' Edible Series, Edited by Andrew F. Smith

Rice: A Global History

By Renee Marton, London: Reaktion Books, 2014. Pp. 144, Hardback £10.99, ISBN: 978-1780233505

Herring: A Global History

By Kathy Hunt, London: Reaktion Books, 2017. Pp. 144, Hardback £10.99, ISBN: 978-1780238319

REVIEWED BY MAXIMILIAN VOGEL

What does a student of global history do when they are not studying? No matter what you do, at some point you will have to eat. If you are fortunate to possess some basic survival skills you might just cook up some rice, pasta, potatoes or another source of carbohydrates not yet consumed by a hungry flatmate and drown it in sauce, most probably tomato. If not, you still won't have to starve, because, by studying at a university, you are most probably living in one of the world's quickly gentrifying cities, with countless varieties of fast food on offer, be it pizza, curry or sushi. Perhaps you only have enough money for a Döner Kebab around the corner. The choice of food is, of course, a personal one but almost every kind of food you opt for has a history that can be described as "global." That food is perhaps *the* global commodity and therefore matters for global history writing is, of course, not a new insight. Aliments have almost always been a major topic for historians: every child knows the story of the protest of Parisian women against skyrocketing bread prices at the beginning of the French Revolution; Marxist scholars have always shown a special interest in the modes of production of food, and since the 1980s, food history has developed into a field of research in its own right. Still, the fact that we are surrounded by food that is 'global' by nature is a fact that is easy to forget or ignore. Since a certain degree of specialization is necessary for any career as a historian, one is already busy enough trying to carve out a niche that there is often little time or energy left over to dig deeper into the history of food.

However, there is a solution to this problem, because, since 2008, there exists an entry into the field of food history that might constitute an alternative to heavy academic tomes, namely the 'Edible Series,' published by Reaktion Books. Though the books are not themselves edible, the series currently consists of 59 books, each dealing with a specific food of global relevance. The series covers everything from ice cream to caviar, from truffles to seaweed. While the series' title suggests as much, it is nevertheless important to note that the series does not claim to meet the normal standards of academic publications; instead, the series attempts to address the history of globally consumed foodstuffs in a way that is

not only informative but also entertaining. Thus, most of the authors of the series are not scholars but rather have a wider range of professional backgrounds that are in one way or another linked to food.

The two specific volumes reviewed here have been written by Renee Marton, a former chef who examines the history of rice, and Kathy Hunt, a journalist and food writer who presents the history of herring. Both have undertaken extensive research into the relevant literature of their respective topics and have cultivated an informative yet light-hearted literary style. As with all the books in the series, their works do not exceed 150 pages in length, making them a short introduction into the topic rather than a comprehensive work of reference.

In "Rice," Marton gives a quick overview of the biology of the plant, its origins, varieties and production and then shows how rice was made into a global commodity, becoming indisputably the most important food plant today. She then tries to capture the varying roles that rice plays as a daily foodstuff in different countries around the world. Marton gives the reader a glimpse of how the cultivation and preparation of rice has deeply influenced cultures worldwide. The long history of rice farming and its central importance for the nutrition of two thirds of the world's population has resulted in a rich variety of festivals, myths, and legends around rice. These last two chapters of her work are the most interesting and it is here that "Rice" comes closest to a kind of cultural history of rice. Unfortunately, her description remains here rather superficial, and she is overambitious in her attempt to capture the immense diversity of cultural practices associated with rice. It would have been more useful to examine one example in detail.

Whereas the global importance of rice is probably well known amongst most readers, the same cannot be said for herring. The fact that herring—salted, pickled or canned—is not currently considered to be one of the more sexy foods perhaps hides its importance for world nutrition. Kathy Hunt skillfully poses this argument to anybody who does not live close to the sea and may thus be unaware of the importance of herring. She begins her history in medieval Europe, when herring was a central commodity of the Hanseatic League. The possibility of preserving herring through salting and its richness in fat and nutrients made herring an important staple food and thus a trade good in Europe from early on. However, it was the invention of canning that helped herring achieve global importance. The fish could now be traded over long distances and its natural abundance made it a cheap alternative to meat for the working class. Due to its importance it is no wonder that herring has also been a source of conflicts throughout history—most prominently at the so-called 'Battle of the Herrings' between England and France in 1429.

While both authors enliven their books with anecdotes and with a love for details of the numerous kinds of preparation of rice or herring respectively, Hunt focuses much more on economic history and its social implications. An example

for this is the well-written chapter on the preservation of herring, a task that seems to have always been in the hands of women. While she graphically describes the hard work of 'gutting' and salting fishes, she also acknowledges the opportunities to gain a certain economic independence that this work constituted for many women. Hunt thereby connects food history to the fields of gender history and the history of labor. Her conclusions are more carefully balanced and show a level of complexity that Marton often lacks in her work on rice. While Marton gives rather descriptive information, Hunt is able to link her book to relevant historical debates without making it inaccessible to non-academics.

Even with a small sample of two books, it is evident that the quality of the volumes varies throughout the series. Even though all books contain a bibliography and an index, it would be unfair to apply standard academic criteria to them since they do not claim to be academic publications. This also becomes clear by looking at the appendix, which always includes a selection of cooking recipes, thereby perfectly linking the theoretical with the practical. The target audience for these books is not the academic scholar but rather a wider readership ranging from foodies to laypersons interested in history. This is not to say that these books are without value for global historians. They not only provide informative entertainment but can also serve as an initial overview for the history of certain foodstuffs that can either be used as a starting point for further readings or as additional background knowledge. The variety of different foods covered by the series is also merit-worthy in itself. In any case the books are an entertaining read and their beautiful layout makes them a great collectible for anyone interested in both history and food.