# Food Anxieties in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland

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**Friday 7th April 2017**
BA-02-005, Ulster University (Belfast campus)

Convened by Dr Ian Miller (Ulster University) and Dr Bryce Evans (Liverpool Hope University)

*To register for this free event, contact: i.miller@ulster.ac.uk*

# Schedule

**10.00 Promoting Healthy Lifestyles**

Jane Hand (University of Warwick), 'Eating as Treating: Food Choice, Public Health and Disease Prevention in Post-War Britain**'**

Nina Holmes (Kingston University), 'Moralism and Lifestyle Promotion: Irish Government Health Pamphlets, 1970s-1990s'

Elsa Richardson (University of Strathclyde), 'Sun-Fired Foods and Nutritional Science: Eustace Mills and Vegetarian Reform'

**11.30 Coffee Break**

**11.45 History, Policy and Practices**

Margaret Charleroy (University of Warwick), 'Diet, Health and Wellbeing in the English Prison System: Past and Present'

Bryce Evans (Liverpool Hope University), 'Recreating the National Kitchen of 1917 in 2017'

Ian Miller (Ulster University), 'Eating and Starving to Death in Medical Care: Ethics, Food and Emotions, c.1970s-90s'

**13.15 Lunch**

**14.15 Researching Post-War Diets**

Peder Clark (LHSTM), 'Searching for Sugar Man: John Yudkin and the Politics of Dietary Advice'

Juliana Adelman (Dublin City University), 'Dietary Surveys and Food Anxieties in Post-WWII Ireland'

**15.15 Coffee**

## 15.30 Keynote Lecture

**'Nutty Anxieties? Informing Debates about Peanut Allergy with History'**

# <u>Dr Matt Smith</u>

**(University of Strathclyde)**

**Dietary Surveys and Food Anxieties in Post-WWII Ireland**
**Juliana Adelman**

The paper will look at the two most ambitious surveys of eating habits and nutrition conducted in Ireland thus far, the 1945-1953 survey initiated by the Department of Local Government and Public Health and the one completed by the Irish Universities Nutrition Alliance in 2000. The surveys suggest not only major changes in Irish diets but also shifts in food culture and in medical thought about food. The paper will first compare the results to ask what they can tell us what and how Irish people were eating. I will then go beyond diet and nutrition to consider the methodology and assumptions, explicit and implicit, in the surveys and how these reflect changes to medical and wider cultural attitudes towards food and health on the island.

**Diet, Health, and Wellbeing in the English Prison System: Past and Present**
**Margaret Charleroy**

Food is critical to the health and wellbeing of incarcerated individuals. Meals are a focal point of the day. But individuals in prison have little choice about what, when, or how much they eat. In this sense, prisoners lose control over aspects of their health and wellbeing, as food becomes a source of frustration and anxiety amongst prisoners. Staff choice about inmate diet is an element of custodial care in the prison setting. Further, poor nutrition/intake and unhealthy food choices have a lasting physical (e.g. diabetes and vitamin deficiencies) and behavioural (e.g. increased or decreased aggression) effects on prisoners.

The roots of current policy and practice of diet in the English prison system lie in the early twentieth century. Prison medical staff experimented with scales of diet to understand the relationship between diet, behavior, and health of a population that was either employed a hard labour or sedentary in a single cell, provided additional complexities to an already intricate balance. Medical staff further adjusted the diets of inmates to curb violent behaviour and promote mindfulness. This paper will investigate the concepts of control, management, choice, and agency of both prisoners and prison medical staff in relation to prison diets in the twentieth century, using a historical narrative from two prisons in England (Warwick Prison and Liverpool Borough Gaol) to understand current policy of prison diet. It will examine how the prison, government, and individual prisoners control of diet in prison and how choices about diet and feeding are made.

**Searching for Sugar Man: John Yudkin and the Politics of Dietary Advice**
**Peder Clark**

British physiologist John Yudkin's work on the deleterious health effects of sugar has undergone a reputational resurrection in the last few years. Copies of his classic 1972 polemic *Pure, White and Deadly* were in such demand on the second-hand market that they were reportedly fetching hundreds of dollars, and Penguin republished the book in 2012. This newfound relevance relates to increasing concern by health campaigners about the apparent effect of sugar on obesity, diabetes and heart disease. But during the so-called 'cholesterol wars' of the 1960s and 70s, fat was the dietary component of most concern, and Yudkin's research was widely disparaged and ignored by the wider scientific community. Critics of Yudkin, including most vocally the American epidemiologist Ancel Keys, argued that his research was poor quality, and that the evidence for a link between dietary fat and coronary heart disease was overwhelming. Although Yudkin sat on many influential advisory groups such as the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food and Nutrition Policy (COMA), dietary guidelines commonly either neglected to mention or downplayed sugar's importance. Yudkin largely ascribed this lack of influence to vested industry interests, both in funding his opponents' work, and stymying his own. Was there a food industry conspiracy against Yudkin or was his hypothesis ignored for more complex reasons?

What can Yudkin's failure to win the 'cholesterol wars' tell us about which research is given credence, and how science is translated into policy? This paper uses archives of Yudkin's correspondence, his public writings and details of his own research funding to reassess his reputation and explore the reasons why his work was originally disregarded by the scientific and medical establishment.

**Recreating the National Kitchen of 1917 in 2017**
**Bryce Evans**

In 1917, with warfare disrupting food imports, the British Ministry of Food announced the opening of a network of state-run canteens. The government was keen to avoid the stigma of poverty associated with the older charitable model of soup kitchen hand-outs, but also wanted to utilise the volunteer-run community kitchens springing up in working class communities to help deal with food shortages. A popular fix was found - a network of centrally-funded public cafeteria known as 'national kitchens' serving cheap yet nutritious food.

The Ministry soon recruited high profile Edwardian food reformers to advise on what food should be served in its national kitchens. These included famous health and nutrition innovators of the age, the likes of Eustace Miles (a vegetarian who ran a well-known health-food shop and restaurant in Charing Cross, London) and Elizabeth Waldie (head-teacher at the Glasgow and West of Scotland College of Domestic Science and author of the best-selling *War Cookery* which announced 'Flesh Formers', 'Heat and Energy Producers', 'Sugars and Starches' and 'Blood Purifiers and Bone Formers' as the four essential food groups).

Anxieties around the new experiment soon emerged. On the one hand, the desire of contemporary food reformers for healthier diets eliminating disease and alcohol chimed with the government's wartime imperative of frugal consumption and maximum production. On the other hand, British Ministry of Food officials agonised over the avant-gardism of dietary innovation, worrying that national kitchens would prove unpopular with the public if the state adhered to a discourse of dietary health linked to improving social ideals.

This paper outlines how, thanks to AHRC funding, the national kitchens of 1917 have now been re-created in 2017. Have the anxieties around social eating and diet in 1917 persisted 100 years later? How have policy approaches to such anxieties changed a century on? And how can the recreation of the national kitchen of 1917 hope to highlight anxieties around the poverty and the consumption of food today

**Eating as Treating: Food Choice, Public health and Disease Prevention in Post-War Britain**
**Jane Hand**

Since the postwar period food choice and diet have become increasingly intertwined with wider health and food policies on disease prevention and public health. Health education has emerged as one platform where issues of food consumption and health are conceptualised and visual images play a key role in promoting healthy eating as a tool of disease prevention. From the 1970s, disease risk has been coded in terms of particular visual attributes and specific practical preventive measures, such as eating less and exercising more. Within this context, health education has functioned to express and articulate specific health ideologies. These have promoted the idea that individualised health risks, often visualised by the obese body, can be overcome (at least in part) by complying with a myriad of health advice that includes specific recommendations about food consumption. At the same time, particular anxieties around likely unhealthy foods has enabled the food industry to coopt the health education message to create new health food markets that champion various health foods as potentially disease-preventing. This paper will chart the development of food choice as an important health behavior within public health while emphasising the role food consumerism has played in communicating scientific evidence about the role of healthy eating on disease causation to the public.

**Moralism and Lifestyle Promotion: Irish Government Health Pamphlets, 1970s -1990s**

**Nina Holmes**

The ill-effects of consumer cultures of convenience on the Irish population in the 1970s and 1980s are described in many sources such as government reports and public health surveys. The Health Education Bureau and the Health Promotion Unit responded by promoting the idea of a 'healthy' lifestyle through pamphlets and education programmes. Reaching beyond the address of specific diseases, this concept encompassed advice relating to everyday practices such as diet and exercise, and defined so-called 'healthy' attitudes.

Encouraged self-regulation and responsibility for health pervaded government issued material, and the ideal 'healthy lifestyle' was apparent in a variety of sources. At the core of this ideal was an increasing preoccupation with diet and nutrition. Visual techniques communicated archetypes of physical health; however these were also imbued with meaning and moral associations. As such, an aspiration to good health was created through the promotion of particular lifestyles, and often a subscription to certain normative social structures and values, such as traditional family units and Christian moral values.

This paper examines incidences of lifestyle promotion in late twentieth century Irish government health ephemera, namely health pamphlets. I will discuss the various visual and rhetorical methods through which information about diet promoted the ideologies and values of particular social norms. This analysis will be presented in the context of key theoretical frameworks such as Michel Foucault's 'biopower' and Louis Althusser's theory of Ideology. Through the permeation of aspirational ideals, it can be surmised that this material functions as an 'Ideological State Apparatus'. This juncture is where my research focuses on the creation of a self-regulating subject through health promotion ephemera produced by the Irish government.

Eating and Starving to Death in Medical Care: Ethics, Food and Emotions, c.1970s-90s
**University of Warwick**

Recent controversies about prisoner force-feeding have renewed debates on the ethical appropriateness of feeding individuals against their will. Critics condemn force-feeding as it seems to clash with prevailing bioethical principles of patient autonomy which grant patients the right to refuse medical treatment (or food) if they wish. This article uses contemporary history to highlight the complex post-war development of feeding policies. It argues that post-war society awarded us the freedom to starve ourselves (or have nutritional support removed) in principle but, in practice, strove at all costs to ensure that we remain fed. While the Declaration of Tokyo (1975) formally declared force-feeding as unethical, in practice the numbers of patients being forcibly or artificially fed has grown dramatically since the 1970s, encompassing not just prisoners and asylum patients but also the comatose, elderly, new-born and hospital patients. Post-war sensibilities towards starvation resulted in complex, contradictory policies on matters such as withdrawing nutritional support or force-feeding an anorexic patient. Overall, the paper explores the ethics of food and eating to ask why it is that society that no-one is deliberately allowed to starve to death.

**Sun-Fired Foods and Nutritional Science: Eustace Mills and Vegetarian Reform**
**Elsa Richardson**

This paper examines the impact of the life-reform movement on understandings of nutrition and well-being in interwar Britain. Often framed as a response to the horrors of World War One and sold as a corrective to the pressures and anxieties of industrial modernity, life-reform advocated fresh air, exercise, sun-bathing, cleanliness and nature as crucial components of good health. Reformers also emphasised the importance of good digestion and pressed the value of so-called 'sun-fired' food, wholegrains, fruits and vegetables over the convenience of canned goods and the temptations of mass-produced meals. With this came a renewed interest in the benefits of vegetarianism as an alimentary route back to 'nature' and as an antidote to the over-refined comforts of the urban world. This renaissance was further aided by advancements in nutritional science that revealed vegetables to be rich in essential vitamins and by public health campaigns that emphasised the need for fresh food. The life-

reform movement also created a consumer market for health-related products and publications that promised to restore the nation's flagging 'vitality'.

One figure who successfully exploited this new consumerism was Eustace Mills, a vegetarian reformer well-known as the owner of meat-free restaurants and health food shops in London and as the author of advice literature like *Keep Happy* (1919) and *Self-Health as a Habit* (1920). Using Miles as a key example, this paper considers how the popularity of vegetarianism as a revitalising and scientifically-verified diet might reveal broader cultures of body management in the interwar period.

**Nutty Anxieties? Informing Debates about Peanut Allergy with History**
**Matthew Smith**

In a 2008 editorial in the *BMJ* entitled 'This Allergies Hysteria is Just Nuts', Harvard medical sociologist and physician Nicholas Christakis criticised peanut bans as 'a gross overreaction' that had the potential to increase, rather than decrease, instances of peanut allergy. Parents' hysterical fear of peanuts encouraged parents to have their children tested, with the result that they would be diagnosed with "mild and meaningless 'allergies' to nuts." Ultimately, a vicious cycle of "anxiety, draconian measures, and increasing prevalence to nut allergies" was created. Virtually unknown prior to the late 1980s, peanut allergies have mushroomed in the past few decades, resulting in thousands of hospitalisations and hundreds of deaths, often in children and young people. Yet, as Christakis' comments indicate, debates abound about the measures to prevent accidental peanut allergy anaphylaxis. By unpacking the history of these debates – and food allergy more generally – by paper suggests that arguing about peanut bans distracts physicians, policy makers and parents from a much more important issue: why have rates of peanut allergy and other food allergies increased and what does this say about our relationship to what we eat and the broader environment?