

variety and sophistication of human communication. For example, there is a diagram of 'Australian aboriginal hand signals', photographs of 'The Laughing Buddha' and 'The painted rickshaw', and a diagram of the 'Meanings of touch among American students at a Western university'.

It is the mark of a stimulating text that the reader responds to discussion by following his or her own imagination; for instance, on reading the account of gestures and signals, I remembered the Celtic 'finger alphabet' as outlined by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*. The more 'rounded' view of communicative channels has made me more aware of the limitations both methodologically and theoretically of much of the work we undertake in the biographical field in considering how individuals construct and 'compose' their lives. Ruth Finnegan's book deserves to become a 'classic' account of human communication but I fear that because of its cross-disciplinary range and depth it may not get the attention it richly deserves.

Brian Roberts
University of Huddersfield

FOOD, LIVES AND THE ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION

Food: a history. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, 2002. London: Pan Books; ISBN: 033049144X paper, 252 pp., £7.99.

This book is about 'the world's most important subject' – food (p. xiii). The author takes a fascinating historic journey, beginning with the invention of cooking – the 'foundation of civilization' – up to the present time where the microwave is the 'last enemy' of cooking (p. 250). A uniquely human trait, from its very origins around a fire, cooking was synonymous with the emergence of culture and the organization of society around food-related behaviours. While present day, technology-driven eating habits are 'uncivilized', food is becoming 'dissocialized' (p. 22) and the microwave is suited to 'solitary' eating patterns (p. 250). In light of recent scientific advances, the fact that cooking was the first scientific revolution is quite humbling. As a dietitian and public health nutritionist constantly trying to understand and explore the question 'why we eat what we eat', this book is mind, imagination and food-appreciation expanding. Although, as a dietitian I did not appreciate the author's perception that we (dietitians) 'like to cultivate a "scientific" self-image, stripped of any cultural context' (p. 62) – a perception somewhat shattered by a dietitian's interest in his book! The historic context of self-made nutritionists and self-styled experts (p. 52) is actually closely and worryingly mirrored in the present day.

This book is full of fascinating gems of knowledge; the domestication of creatures began with the systematic farming of molluscs (p. 65) around 6000–8000 years ago. A hotel in New York in 1867 had 145 items on its dinner menu (p. 124) – now that is food choice! In the 1860s the globalization of the British biscuit was evident with reports of biscuit tins being used as a portable garden by a Mongolian Chieftainess (p. 224).

The style of the book is entertaining and very easy to read – there are useful cross-references to earlier and to later chapters. Fernández-Armesto has divided the book into eight main chapters, beginning with ‘The invention of cooking’ and ending with ‘Feeding the giants’. The cooking revolution and the meaning of food are described before we are taken into the descriptions of breeding and the emergence of agriculture. The global account of food and social hierarchy are justifiably given a whole chapter. Chapter 6 begins the fascinating tale of cross-cultural eating. The influence of empires on food culture is emphasized – with colourful descriptions of the Turkish court (pp. 159–61). The author’s attention to detail – for example, the number of staff in each of the six halva kitchens brings the tale to life. The penultimate chapter describes the incredible ecological food exchange from different parts of the world that has shaped food patterns. The historic shifting of food patterns is eloquently described in this book.

The present-day debate relating to food inequalities had its origins early in history (p. 117). In the beginning, it was the quantity of food; this then developed into diversity (p. 126). Inequality and food are inextricably linked; the section on ‘cross-class transfers’ (p. 140) in Chapter 5, ‘Food and rank’, provides thought-provoking ideas on why these differences exist. The ‘socially differentiated range of pasta’ and the ‘socially distinctive forms of chicken’ (p. 144) described in this section may make your next supermarket trip slightly more interesting. Food is a subject that everyone has an experience of – regardless of their academic speciality – and this book will be a valuable asset to anyone with an interest in food.

Fernández-Armesto has written not only an enjoyable, informative, entertaining book but one that is a useful reference source.

Amelia Lake
University of Newcastle