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Romanticism, Volume 12, Number 1, 2006, pp. 44-51 (Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rom.2006.0003>

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How Wordsworth invented picnicking and saved British Culture

It could plausibly be argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or even of religion (George Orwell).¹

Ideology is externalized in food (Timothy Morton).²

Picnicking, which first evolved in early nineteenth century Britain, is an ideological act, freighted with values for 'nature' and 'culture', food and taste, aesthetics and ethics, community and solitude. To picnic is to consume not only particular food, but also a specific environment chosen according to an aesthetic standard, and a particular form of sharing food according to certain standards of behaviour. It means creating a moveable feast and overcoming difficulties and inconveniences, not only for preparation and transportation, but also for consumption and cleanup. Yet picnicking is the pleasurable pursuit of a leisured people, so the difficulty of moving the feast has some reward. The reward is primarily ideological: it enables the participant to share a form of eating that creates relationships between small groups of people, natural landmarks, and cultural ideals. These relationships form a consciousness of national identity. Picnicking, especially for early nineteenth-century picnickers, was thus a way of performing Britishness.

For the Romantic pioneers, picnicking was an aesthetic and ethical act of everyday culture

that had the hegemonic effect of recreating cultural relations and identities.³ They incorporated picnics into their everyday habits, but they also represented picnics in art as idealizations of a reformed culture.⁴ As part of the reform agenda of key Romantic writers, the picnic was inherently a practice that was symbolic and a symbol that was practiced. The history of how the picnic became the accepted symbol of proper relationships among social classes and a landscape recognized as 'national' is the story of how the specific culture and class relationships of nineteenth century Britain emerged.

A DEFINITION _____

Picnicking is a recent invention.⁵ 'Picnic' did not enter the English language until the mid eighteenth century and referred to 'a fashionable social entertainment in which each person contributed a share of the provisions' (OED 1a).⁶ Such a picnic would be held in the public rooms of a tavern or large house in London (inside rather than outside), and was expressly designed for the social elite to show off their cookery, and their musical or theatrical talent. In 1802, the Prince of Wales and his companions formed 'The Pic-Nic Society', which met regularly to perform plays they had written themselves.

In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, however, this sense was displaced by

the one we currently recognize: 'a pleasure party including an excursion to some spot in the country where all partake of a repast out of doors' (OED 1a). This rapid shift has not been explained. In the original sense, picnics took place indoors in the city. They were a high fashion elite practice that provided gustatory and aesthetic pleasures. In the new sense, picnics take place outside in some rural or rustic setting. They are leisured fashions for a much broader section of society, offering the nostalgic and primitivist pleasures of rural walking and the picturesque. In less than twenty years, an invitation to a picnic would signify a completely different set of customs, clothes, social groupings, behaviours, food, settings, and values.

Picnickers must seek the leisured pleasures of the excursion and eating at a specific place. They cannot be travellers simply making a wayside stop of necessity or field workers taking a break. The modern picnic party must provide its own provisions, transport them to the place, and wait upon itself. This narrow definition will allow us to discriminate between a medieval hunting feast, where an army of servants transported, prepared, and served huge, elaborate dishes to an army of aristocratic hunters, and a Victorian picnic like the one described in *The Pickwick Papers*, where portable, prepared foods are brought to a picturesque spot by Mr. Wardle's servants, but served out by members of the hunting party. The first is a military *affaire du state*, the second a more spontaneous pleasure party.

We cannot consider the so-called 'picnics' in *Emma* as fully modern. Austen refers to the picnic as a way of mocking Mrs Elton's pretensions to high fashion and her taste for a decadent, frivolous form of leisure belonging to the new vulgar elite of Brighton, Bath, and London. For Mrs Elton, the consummate social climber, picnics mean an aristocratic fete, and her proposal is a distinctive emulation of dominant taste. The Donwell Abbey luncheon

is not a picnic because it takes place indoors in conformity to Mr. Knightley's late eighteenth-century tastes, despite Mrs Elton's original desire to have it outside (like 'tea on the patio') with a 'gypsy' rusticity. Box Hill is more properly a modern picnic with its 'cold collation' and excursions into the pleasure grounds of the estate, but Emma and the judgmental narrator reject it as a thoroughly improper, vulgar modern taste.⁷ The Box Hill picnic represents Austen's awareness of the conflicted iconography of picnicking in the contemporary culture wars.

THE WORDSWORTHS GO PICNICKING _____

The changing definition of picnicking is an example of cultural making in Michel De Certeau's sense, a consumption of a cultural practice that creates a new cultural practice.⁸ It may indicate a struggle over who gets to determine standards of taste. In the two decades during which the picnic's cultural meaning is unlaced from one authority and re-laced onto another, the tactics of class war are visible. By tracing a genealogy of picnicking, we can discover more about what it means that a ritual celebrating national identity, community, and connection to aestheticized nature, becomes most popular with urban, industrialized middle classes.

One of the people responsible for creating the modern picnic is Dorothy Wordsworth. As one of the great walkers of the Romantic period, it might be assumed that she would naturally go on many picnics. However, her (albeit fragmentary) journals do not record any outdoor eating until 1800, and not with any regularity until much later. For the most part, Dorothy followed the eighteenth-century custom of eating either before setting out or at one's destination. There were practical reasons for this, but the taste for a certain kind of meal necessitated close proximity to the kitchen. As Georgiana Battiscombe asserts, 'no one

connected the idea of pleasure with the notion of a meal eaten anywhere except under a roof' (3). For the late eighteenth-century British, a real meal involved comforts and types of food only available indoors. If you were going to share a meal, you almost by definition had to do it indoors – illustrating Mary Douglas's theory that, for a meal to be defined as 'a meal', it has to contain expected food in the expected order in the expected surroundings.⁹

Wordsworth's usual habit throughout the Alfoxden and Grasmere journals is to eat before or after a walk.¹⁰ Even for such stalwart lovers of the outdoors, the domestic pleasures of sharing a meal before a fire or with friends outweighed the virtues of picnicking. If this was the usual habit for the most unusual representatives of their time, particularly among their social class, then it is clear how strange it would be to plan an 'excursion to some spot in the country where all partake of a repast out of doors'. Yet, despite following the established custom most of the time, the Wordsworths fell into a practice of carrying their food with them on their walks, and consuming it at picturesque rest stops. Of all the meals described in her Grasmere journal, five could be considered picnics, and of those, three are the complete thing. The practice appears to begin spontaneously between 1800–1802. Just prior to Dorothy's descriptions of their adult picnicking, William had completed his 1799 'Two-Part Prelude', where he described feasting with his school friends:

on the cool green ground,
Or in the woods, or by a riverside
Or fountain – festive banquets that provoked
The languid action of a natural scene
By pleasure of corporeal appetite.

(II, 93-7)¹¹

When he was fourteen, he and his gang of friends used to sail on Coniston Lake to a gothic Hall where they would get:

Fresh butter, tea-kettle, and earthenware,
And chafing-dish with smoking coals, and so
Beneath the trees we sat in our small boat
And in the covert ate our delicate meal
Upon the calm smooth lake.

(II, 152–6)

Wordsworth claims this picnic experience as the first awakening of his consciousness to 'mark / That sense of dim similitude which links / Our moral feelings with external forms' (II, 163–5), suggesting that the connection between picnicking and a moral identification with landscape run deep. Since the journal experiences occur only a matter of months after William composed these poetic memories, which look back twelve or thirteen years, there is a strong correlation between these, and the more general inventions of picnicking.

DECIPHERING A PICNIC

Food and eating are symbolic practices that define one's network of social relationships. Who you do and don't eat with, or what you do and don't eat is a process of inclusion or exclusion that defines the self.¹² Sharing a meal articulates social relations, and food primarily 'means' the symbolic network and values with which one desires to identify.¹³

Examining the social history of picnicking since the Wordsworths demonstrates that picnicking subtly performed renegotiations throughout British culture. From about the 1820s on, the picnic became a popular leisured pursuit, mostly among the middle classes. After the Bank Holiday Act (1871), 'picnic trains' were established to take working classes to the countryside for weekend picnics.¹⁴ Georgiana Battiscombe asserts that picnicking is a specifically British national custom, and the National Trust claims the tradition as a distinguishing feature of British heritage.¹⁵ Stephen Gill has demonstrated how Wordsworth's poetry influenced the creation of the National Trust. It is logical that his poetry

would also have influenced the most popular form of consuming those lands he helped identify as a 'national trust'.¹⁶

The popularity of the new picnic rapidly altered the everyday structures and expectations of holidays, travelling, aesthetics, and taste for mass culture.¹⁷ Going on a picnic made a statement about who you were and what your values and tastes were. But picnics were also about national identity: 'food permits a person ... to partake each day of the national past ... to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in [national] culinary "being"' ¹⁸ Picnicking is a form that literally connects the eaters to the land, thus creating what Bell and Valentine call 'communities of affiliation' (p. 109). Communities perform their affiliation by participating in trans-local food rituals (Thanksgiving, Jewish cuisine, and vegetarianism are examples). Picnics create a British national consciousness in the early nineteenth century.

During the nineteenth century, people in Britain did share, and could imagine themselves as sharing, a common diet, a common form of eating, and a common landscape.¹⁹ The picnic was one of many practices that allowed the urbanized, leisured classes to colonize rural parts of Britain at the periphery of industrialized culture, not only for the economic benefits of an integrated food system, but more importantly for the consumption of leisure practices and tastes that form the modern, national identity. As a practice that fuses the consumption of food with the consumption of land and landscape, the picnic enabled a physical retracing of geography.

HAMPERING THE REVOLUTION

Timothy Morton has argued that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the language of food was being reshaped as a discourse of power.²⁰ Food was used metaphorically in philosophical, religious, social, ethical, political, or economic arguments.

Because the food metaphors refashioned taste in the broadest sense, food became a discourse of power.²¹ Dietary discourse brought a new type of consumer into being, one who desired to refashion the self through consumption of the right image.²²

In this context, the Wordsworths' development of the picnic is a political act. The picnic was a consumerist practice that refashioned the self through certain tastes, values, and images. Picnics denounce the amoral eating, use of surplus wealth, and leisure of the upper classes *and* lower classes. As Craige and Battiscombe have elaborated, picnics poach from both upper and lower class fresco eating styles, such as the hunting feast, the plowman's lunch, the angler's repast, and the pilgrim's wayside snack. The new hybrid takes its authority by representing itself as a recovery of the original strength, nature, 'virtue', health, and national essence. Picnics offer a nostalgic image for the new bourgeois consumer, a reaction against the luxurious, decadent, feminized aristocratic forms of eating (including the aristocratic form of picnicking). At the same time, the modern picnic offers the lower classes a tempered, moral, manly form of leisured consumption as a corrective to excessive, self-destructive debauchery, represented as a deviation from their 'original' frugal food habits that picnicking recovered. Thus picnicking was offered to the lower classes as a way for them to become what (it was imagined) they once were. By picnicking, the new consumer used his leisure and surplus income to improve himself and his community, recreating the primordial Britain of strength and proper relationships between self, community and land. Picnicking was thus a way for the newly enriched and leisured classes to perform their fitness to influence the social, political, and economic development of Britain.

Wordsworth's most important contribution to this refashioning of taste is *The Excursion*, the longest and arguably the most influential

poem he published in his lifetime. Its publication in the mid-Regency is significant both in the development of the picnic as a popular recreation and in the more general refashioning of taste. Although *The Excursion* has never been considered as a document in the refashioning of early nineteenth century leisure tastes, it contains three elaborate descriptions of meals, all acting as prescriptive statements on ethics, aesthetics, nature, culture, manners, community, and social order.²³ These meals provide settings for the philosophical discussions that critics have privileged as the 'meaning' of the poem. If, following Johnston and Hickey, *The Excursion* envisions society refashioned around new principles of duty, ethics, and value, then it is essential to examine how the poem refashions basic tastes.²⁴ Looking at Wordsworth's descriptions of meals through the lens of diet studies reveals the way he encodes taste with morality, and then uses a critique of taste to promote sweeping cultural reforms.

The final meal is eaten by the Pastor, his family, the Wanderer, the Solitary and the Poet on an island during an evening pleasure excursion. Modern readers have long assumed that it is a picnic, but it is not so called and would not have been recognized as such by contemporaries. The reason for the confusion is precisely that the meal is one of the very first published descriptions of the modern picnic. This meal is remarkable not only because it is an emergent form, but also because of its position as the third meal in a series, its carnivalesque nature, and its nostalgic connection to gypsy rituals. We can read the meals as a narrative progression, as three different formulations of commensality, culminating in the final one, which metonymically binds the circle together (Douglas, 53, Grignon, 24). Since the final meal is an entirely new form of eating, it contributes some essential element to the basic reciprocity rules and relational identities formed by food

sharing necessary for binding the Solitary to this community. Thus, while the philosophical dialogues contain Wordsworth's social diagnosis, social bonding is actually performed in rituals of commensality. The fact that the poem ends with a new food ritual suggests that practising a philosophically informed commensality is essential to Britain's recovery from war, radical social change, and economic transition.²⁵

As the third meal in the sequence, this picnic, a 'a choice repast', represents a counter to the first meal as the proper method of reorganizing the world. While adults initiate the other meals, two boys initiate the picnic, bringing the baskets down to the boats and then serving the adults as they sit around a 'gypsy-fire', which they have all shared in building. 'One spirit animating old and young' allows a general escape from the usual identities and hierarchical relationships in the group. These freedoms were not possible at the indoor meals, suggesting a connection between place, meal, and identity. At the picnic, stones are skipped on the lake, generating echoes, singing, and gathering flowers: more intimate, and more playful bonding than the fraternal discussion, the domestic socializing, or the philosophical debate occasioned by the other meals.

This picnic in rural Eden reduces the idea of community to an imagined primordial state: men, women, and children eating outside around a fire and playing together as equals. The gypsy motif may support a nostalgic reimagining of the nomadic origin of community. As the Solitary says, it is 'an emblem here / Of one day's pleasure, and all mortal joys!' Thus in his poetic creation of the modern form of the picnic, Wordsworth represents a ceremony that, in its fundamental design, is supposed to repeat the primal rites that created the first community. In practicing these primal rites, nineteenth-century picnickers were participating in the high

Romantic project of re-creating society from the ashes of wars, revolutions, and social disruptions.

In picnicking, individuals could generate a sense of their common humanity and perform community on a small scale. Individuals could also reconnect their community to their land, thus re-imagining their identity as part of the physical nation. The picnic grounds Wordsworth's humanism in daily practice, restoring national unity to a Regency society divided against itself and threatened by the possibility of popular revolution. Like other attempts to change British diet, picnicking becomes part of a larger reform effort undertaken by conservative, middle-class evangelicals in the name of restoring health, morality, and order, and in order to prevent the popular revolution they believed was immanent. It is from this source that picnics will become what the editors of *The National Trust Book of Picnics* rhapsodically claim as a distinctly English tradition that defines what it means to be English.

As nineteenth-century society reorganized its social, political, and economic relationships, we can speculate about the role that picnicking had in performing those new alignments. The sufficient material conditions coincide with the ideological ones. People in the early nineteenth century desired picnics. Since picnicking depends upon a wide variety of new technologies, inventions the emergent middle class claims as its own, it is a meal that also symbolizes progressive modernity.²⁶ While picnicking offers an antidote to the ills of modernity, it also affirms it. The nostalgic, pastoral fantasy at the root of picnicking is not an escape from modern life, but a way of continually recreating the social order in a comprehensible manner. Picnicking enables the emerging bourgeoisie to ritually re-affirm their community identity and their link to the land at a time when both were jeopardized by new social conditions. The modern picnic belongs to

the practices in which an industrialized middle class society identifies itself, its goals and its role. Its rise to popularity is a measure of the revolutions in taste and material conditions that are the hallmarks of modernity. This is leisure time well spent. ■

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NOTES

I am deeply grateful to Kathy Dalton for assistance in researching this topic; to Robert Ryan for suggesting the idea; and to Timothy Morton for his enthusiasm.

1. *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Gollancz, 1937), p. 82.

2. *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 11).

3. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 6.

4. See Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), pp. 7–8.

5. See James Trager, *The Food Chronology: A Food Lover's Compendium of Events and Anecdotes, from Prehistory to the Present* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1995), pp. 178–232; Georgina Battiscombe, *English Picnics* (London: Harvill, 1949) 12–83; and Carter Walker Craigie, *A Movable Feast: The Picnic as a Folklife Custom in Chester County, PA, 1870–1925*. Diss. U. Pennsylvania, 1976 (Ann Arbor: Xerox University Microfilms, 1976), pp. 6–23.

6. Although I concentrate on the etymology and development of a taste for picnics, there are socioeconomic and technological reasons for why picnicking could not emerge as a mass pursuit until the nineteenth century. Picnic food – by definition luxury, surplus food – was not widely available prior to the nineteenth century; see J.C. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1964), pp. 206–81; Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (2nd edn, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 47–220; John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present*

Day (rev. edn, London: Scolar Press, 1979), pp. 10–11. The reason picnic food was not available, besides being too insubstantial and costly for an agricultural-based society, was because it presented technical difficulties of preparation and transportation. Until canning and chemical preservation were introduced in the nineteenth century, foods that an individual could transport conveniently were not palatable (Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1973), p. 276); and what was palatable could not be conveniently transported. Nor was it feasible for the vast majority of pre-nineteenth century people to embark on an excursion to a picnic spot: the technology for mass transportation did not exist, nor did time for leisure; see J.A.R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Holiday: A Social History* (2nd edn, Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1976), pp. 21–95.

7. Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. by Steven M. Parrish (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), pp. 240, 247.

8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. xviii–xx.

9. Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (Boston: Routledge, 1975), pp. 258–60.

10. For examples of picnics see Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woof (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), pp. 103–4. For the 'Two-Part Prelude', see the text in *Romanticism. An Anthology*, ed. by Duncan Wu, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

11. See *Grasmere Journal* entries for 29 May 1800, 23 June 1800, 16 April 1802 and 4 May 1802.

12. Douglas, pp. 256–60; Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', *Food and Drink in History: Selections from the Annales, Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, vol. V, ed. by Robert Foster and Orest Ranum, trans. by Elborg Forster and Patricia Ranum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 166–73; Anna Meigs, 'Food as a Cultural Construction', *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 103; Mintz, 'Food and Eating: Some Persisting Questions' (in Warren Belasco and Philip Scranton, *Food Nations: Selling Taste in Consumer Societies* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 26–9; Claude Grignon, 'Commensality and Social Morphology: An Essay of Typology', *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages*, ed. by Peter Scholliers (New York: Berg, 2001), pp. 23–7.

13. Belasco and Scranton, 2; David Bell and Gill Valentine, *Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 93.

14. Pimlott, pp. 87–95.

15. *The National Trust Book of Picnics* (London: National Trust Enterprises, 1993), pp. 1–3.

16. Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 235–60.

17. Peter Atkins and Ian Bowler, *Food in Society: Economy, Culture, Geography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 273. See also *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, ed. by Deane W. Curtin and Lisa M. Heldke, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 11; Scholliers, p. 7; and Bell and Valentine, p. 77.

18. In Counihan and Esterik, p. 24.

19. The out-sourcing of food production, and the development of an international trade in food, food marketing, and transportation created a uniform diet in the nineteenth century for most of Britain, abolishing the regional diets that had persisted as a result of differences in regional production: see Atkins and Bowler, pp. 260–83, and Ross, pp. 23–38.

20. Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 5–15.

21. Timothy Morton, *Shelley and the Revolution in Taste: The Body and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 3–5.

22. Timothy Morton, *Radical Food: The Culture and Politics of Eating and Drinking, 1790–1820*, vol. 1 (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 3–8.

23. The primary focus has been linguistic, influenced largely by Frances Ferguson's *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). See Sally Bushell, *Re-Reading The Excursion: Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate) 2002; Alison Hickey, *Impure Conceits: Rhetoric and Ideology in Wordsworth's 'Excursion'* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University) 1997; Lisa Hirschfield, 'Between Memory and History: Wordsworth's *Excursion*', *Romanticism on the Net*, 16 (November 1999; <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/memory.html>); Dewey Hall, 'Signs of the Dead: Epitaphs, Inscriptions, and the Discourse of the Self', *ELH*, 68 (2001), pp. 655–77; Michael O'Neill, '"The Words He Uttered ...": A Reading of Wordsworth', *Romanticism on the Net*, 3 (August 1996; <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/uttered.html>).

24. Kenneth Johnston, *Wordsworth and The Recluse*

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. xii–xvi, 3–14, 282–4; Hickey, pp. 54–9, 149. See also See M.H. Abrams’s brief analysis in ‘English Romanticism: the Spirit of the Age’; O’Neill, p. 5; William Galperin, *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth: The Interpretation of a Career* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), pp. 37–57; David Simpson, *Wordsworth and the Figurings of the Real* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 200–2; Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry: 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1964), 302–19; and Teeryl L. Givens and Anthony Russell, ‘Romantic Agonies: Human Suffering and the Ethical Sublime’, *Romanticism Across the Disciplines* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), pp. 236–45.

25. These inventions would include moveable food that is tasty, affordable and abundant, mass transportation that is quick and reliable, standardization of leisure time, and a luxury economy that extends through society.