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Herring. A History of the Silver Darlings (review)

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arguments, but the spirit of their concerns is worth addressing at this juncture. By its very nature, the quality of information obtained from contributors is quite vulnerable to the passing of time, memory, various agendas, and, of course, the fact that some material cannot be substantiated. With these problems in mind, Helen Clark and Elizabeth Carnegie have been thorough in their inclusion of variable answers, which clearly reflect a more open-ended approach to the subject. Their sensitivity to their contributors' unique perspectives is also evident: they give voice to important topics that typically remain confined to the privacy of the family. It must be said that older people in more recent oral history projects have confirmed the content of *She Was Aye Workin'*. In conclusion, one must regard this text as an important endeavour to preserve Scottish urban history, and provide the historian with undeniably rich material.

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ELIZABETH L. BLACK

Herring. A History of the Silver Darlings.

By Mike Smylie Pp 224.

ISBN 0 7524 2988 4.

Stroud: Tempus. 2004. £9.99.

The herring has been of such importance in fisheries that not a few books have been written about it over the past century and more; and since herring are now of much reduced importance the question might be raised whether there is scope for another book on such a well-known fish species. However Mike Smylie has found a fresh angle of approach to the subject. He himself smokes herring for sale; and every chapter of the book is introduced by a recipe with cooking instructions for preparing, or involving, herring. The objective of this book is more to create an atmosphere than to make a scholarly analysis: such eye-catching chapter titles as 'A Hundred Herring Baked in a Pie' and 'The Rudiments of the British Empire' give a useful clue to the tenor of the text. In effect the author ranges freely, following his own inclinations and interests. The book is in three parts, respectively entitled 'The Common Atlantic Pool', 'Catchin' Herring', and 'Curin' Herring'; and it consists of short chapters of which there are in all nineteen. The work is very readable and gives many interesting points of information; but it does not aim at an in-depth discussion or analysis, whether of the biology of the species, or of its historical or economic importance: in the main it is a series of methodically arranged vignettes. While there is a bibliography there are no specific references to sources of information.

The book sets out to range widely over the role of the herring and what it has meant to a great variety of people and communities around the North Atlantic and in Europe. The early history of herring fishing was never systematically recorded, but there is no doubt that a fishery that always showed big variations from day to day and from year to year does include numerous colourful episodes: and here the author is happy to present many of these. His book includes numerous examples and gives many instances of personal experience of fishermen, fish curers and others. Its nearest parallel in previous fisheries literature is the book by Mark Kurlansky on the cod—the other main species in the long and colourful story of the fisheries of the North Atlantic.

The first section is the main historical part of the work. Such early records as exist of herring and herring fishing reflect the feudal legacy of much of Europe and are largely from the archives of towns and religious houses; however the importance of herring to the Romans and the Saxons is also claimed. The

mention of herring in the Domesday Book is recorded, as are their records in mediaeval Great Yarmouth and Scarborough with their herring fairs. The uncertainties and imprecision of the various mentions of herring in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Hanseatic records are recognised, together with acknowledgement that this was the first definite phase of their major commercial importance. There is something of a brief diversion to the author's own personal interests with the systematic account of the different methods and traditions of curing herring. The chapter entitled 'The Gold Mine in the North Sea' refers to the rise of the Dutch open sea fishery, and to the international conflicts and rivalry that it provoked. In doing so several of the most important developments of the herring fishery are recognised as well as its importance in wider history, although from the viewpoint of the latter the presentation is perhaps over-dramatic. This chapter opens with the contribution of the shadowy figure of Willem van Beukels who is popularly credited in the fourteenth century with devising the method of removing the gut from herring (before putting them in salt) that greatly enhanced their keeping quality. It also mentions the compulsory and duty-free use of solar salt from Spain and Portugal and the development of the 'buss', the vessel which took aboard barrels and salt which caught the herring and on which curing was done. In effect the methods and organisation of the Dutch which allowed them to dominate an important international resource for over two centuries are underlined.

The earlier efforts at herring fishing in Britain are treated in the chapter which has the somewhat extravagant title of 'The Rudiments of the British Empire', and the government bounties which stimulated the main take-off of Scottish fisheries from the latter half of the eighteenth century are itemised, although somewhat perversely the accompanying need for harbours is passed over. The remaining two chapters in this section deal with some of the more colourful episodes in the fisheries of Norway and New England: the fisheries were of major importance on much of the Norwegian west coast in the nineteenth century; and in the same century a variety of catching methods and markets developed in New England.

The second part of the book is very largely—and appropriately—about Scotland: the Scottish herring fishery during the nineteenth century grew to the point that it was the biggest fishery in the globe. A chapter is devoted to fish weirs, which were actually of limited importance for catching herring; but the following chapter deals with the drift net which for centuries was the main catching method, but this chapter gets equal space with that on weirs. The chapter on 'West Coast Toilers' is mainly about the Clyde fishery which was enmeshed in controversy and became dominated by the ring net; and main historical episode of the build-up of the Scottish East Coast fishery is more fully dealt with in the two chapters which are on sail boats and steam boats. A chapter is then devoted to the very testing anti-climax of the inter-war period when the main continental herring markets were badly disorganised. This part of the book is completed by a chapter devoted to the distinctive cultural characteristics of fishing communities and covers such issues as family boats, housing, wedding customs and the numerous superstitions.

The third section, 'Curin' Herring', opens with the treatment of the herring fisheries of the west coast of the Highlands and Islands; and although herring were cured there, the big herring curing industry was actually on the east coast: the author appears to have been influenced by the still-visible remains of deserted curing stations. A chapter is devoted to an essential element of the fisheries in the 'fisher lassies', the women who gutted and packed the herring into barrels, and many of whom followed the fishing at its various bases; the chapter sub-title of 'an Unheard-of Phenomenon' is well-taken, as these essential women

workers are under-represented in extant literature. It is understandable that with his own background and interests the author has a chapter on 'Smoking the Herring', which details the making of the traditional East Anglian bloater and the more recent history of the kipper. The penultimate chapter is on legislation relating to the herring, which details developments from the late eighteenth century to the recent provisions under the Common Fisheries Policy; it is to be noted that there is also an appendix in which there is an extended verbatim quotation from the observations of the Rev. Nigel Marsh on the herring in the important parliamentary report of 1800, which was effectively on the eve of the main phase of expansion. Half of the concluding chapter on the 'Legacy of the Herring' is somewhat surprisingly on the North-East USA and Canada: and herring have now become of minor importance, whatever their more important and colourful past. The final comments are on 'red herring' which is seen as an ironic term for the intention to mislead by laying false trails, and the stated corollary is that in our modern age of affluence we have perhaps forgotten how to live.

The book is well illustrated by a wide range of evocative photographs and lino cuts; and while these add an important dimension to the text, on a number of occasions they could have been better reproduced—although this would no doubt have added to the cost of production. Even so these are essential in helping the author to capture the atmosphere of the herring fisheries.

The book will find a wide readership, and that is not likely to be confined to those places where the herring and the herring fishery are important parts of tradition and folk memory; but it will be more useful for checking on memorable episodes and eye-catching details than as a balanced and in-depth historical work.

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The Sectarian Myth in Scotland: Of Bitter Memory and Bigotry

By Michael Rosie

ISBN1403921679

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2004. £45.00. Pp. x, 184.

Sectarianism is a vexed issue in Scottish history and public life, discussion habitually serves to inflame rather than to inform and usually has a narrow frame of reference: football, schools, parades. In this book Michael Rosie seeks to begin a new analytical and rational discussion of the topic. The first part of his argument is that Scotland is not a sectarian society; that there is no evidence of sectarian views extending beyond the bounds of individual prejudice to characterise politics or the organisation of society. The most obvious comparison is with Northern Ireland, where confessional politics and social organisation along the lines of denomination are much more evident. Most of Rosie's clearly argued conclusions are drawn from statistics from the census and a variety of surveys of opinion; sometimes the reader wishes for a more textured discussion, but it is Rosie's intention to argue from evidence considered to be as objective as possible in order to counter the partisan views which have coloured much earlier discussion of the topic. He finds little support for the contentions that voting patterns correlate with religious denomination; the notion of a Roman Catholic bloc vote for Labour is undermined, as is the image of a Presbyterian Unionist phalanx. In matters of identity he argues for a relegation of religious persuasion as an explanation of attitudes towards, and perceptions of, Scottishness. He concludes on this aspect: 'If contemporary Scottishness is