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The poisoner's cookbook

Biographical note:

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What is food to one man may be fierce poison to others.
Lucretius (c.99 B.C.–c.55 B.C.)

Amuse bouche: some notes on poisons and poisoning

Look up *poison* in any dictionary and the definition always includes the information that although poisons cause death or injury, the word comes from the Latin for 'drink' – one of life's necessities. The act of poisoning is, moreover, seemingly as ancient as cookery itself.¹ If a living organism can eat, drink or otherwise absorb matter, it can ingest poison, and this fact was not lost on Australian Indigenous peoples who poisoned waterholes to weaken game and fish. Menes, an early Egyptian king, closely studied the properties of poisonous plants, while ancient papyri reveal how the Egyptians discovered how to extract prussic acid from peach kernels. We know this as cyanide, the poison supposedly popular with Cold War spies that can kill in as little as thirty seconds.

The classical Greeks and Romans drew their poisons from a deadly arsenal of aconite, opium, lead, mercury, gold, silver, copper and henbane. The latter foul-smelling plant is not widely familiar today, but looks dangerous, with sticky leaves and dull yellow flowers. The names it has been known by auger poorly too – 'Devil's eye', 'Poison tobacco' and 'Stinking nightshade'. The ancient Greeks drank hemlock to suicide, also using this 'poisoned cup' for State purposes as when Socrates was executed because his philosophical teachings were judged to have corrupted the youth of Athens. Euripides had his Medea send Jason's new bride a poisoned gown, while the Romans favoured delivering their poisons in seemingly innocuous food and drinks. Nero was notorious for disposing of unwanted family members in this manner and, with the aid of his personal poisoner, Locusta, murdered his own brother, Britannicus, with cyanide.

A century before the birth of Christ, King Mithridates of Pontos on the Black Sea, now in present-day Turkey, so feared poisoning that he tested toxins and possible antidotes on condemned criminals, and then took small doses of poison daily to build up an immunity to them. This strategy backfired when the Romans invaded his kingdom and he attempted to kill himself by drinking poison, but his acquired resistance muted its effect, and he had to command one of his own soldiers to stab him to death.

During the Middle Ages, both amateur and professional poisoners targeted kings, emperors and popes in cruel and creative ways. In 1531, Richard Roose, the Bishop of Rochester's cook, added poison to the porridge he prepared for his master's household. All who ate this tainted gruel fell extremely ill, including the poor who had been given the remains of the dish in an act of charity, and two of the poisoned died, although the bishop, who did not eat from the communal pot, escaped unharmed. Roose was boiled to death – just like his oats – the first to be punished with this ghastly new method of execution.

At this time, a council of alchemists met regularly in Venice to arrange State-sanctioned (but clandestine) poisonings for those who stood in the way of those who governed over

the Venetians. We can still read the meticulous records of their meetings which include long lists of intended victims, details of the contracts with the poisoners and their rates of pay. This was at a time when the knowledge of poisons was expanding, as Italian botanists were identifying an ever-increasing number of poisonous plants, to the point where Giambattista della Porta's book *Magiae Naturalis* (Natural Magic), first published in 1558, included a section on poisoning – in particular the then popular method of drugging wine – alongside discussions of demonology, magnetism and the camera obscura. Porta also provides a recipe for a sinister concoction of aconite, caustic lime, arsenic, bitter almonds and powdered glass which, when mixed with honey, could be formed into deadly pills.

The notorious Italian poisoner Toffana sold her poison, an arsenic solution, as *Agua Toffana* or Toffana's Water, in vials labelled as a cosmetic and decorated with a saint's picture. She told unhappy wives to apply this expensive, although effective, liquid to their skin before intimacy with their husbands, but never to ingest it themselves, and to enjoy the result quietly. But some could not remain silent about their actions and Toffana was eventually arrested and executed in 1709 by strangulation for murdering six hundred men. There is, however, no record of charges of any kind being brought against all those widows.

In the latter part of the sixteenth century, France became a world centre of poisoning with reputedly some 30,000 so-called 'sorcerers' (poisoners) operating in Paris in the 1570s. The use of poisons was reportedly widespread and the quite reasonable fear of being poisoned even more pervasive. As a result, when England's King Henry IV visited the Louvre, he would only eat eggs that he cooked himself and only drink water he drew from the Seine. There were several failed plots to poison English royalty, including Queen Elizabeth I, who thwarted a Spanish plan to smear an opium-based poison on her saddle. To protect the Royal person, her entourage tasted every dish and beverage before her lips touched a morsel. They also inspected her clothes for signs of poison and regularly dosed their regent with antidotes, just in case.

Although she died from an abscessed throat at the age of seventy, fear of poisoning persisted among the English royals after Elizabeth, although the use of poison was not restricted to such elevated circles. Poison was, indeed, so common in eighteenth century France that it was known as 'inheritance powder', an implication not lost on nineteenth century English painter and author, Thomas Griffiths Wainwright. A Romantic dandy without the income to support his extravagant habits, Wainwright moved in elevated artistic circles, counting Blake, Byron, Keats, Hazlitt and Fuseli among his friends. When a series of his close relatives died, each one of whose bequests alleviated his financial woes, Wainwright was arrested. He never admitted to murder, but circumstantial evidence – his obvious motivation, possession of books on poison and a special interest in strychnine which could not then be reliably detected at autopsy – led to his conviction (although for forgery, not homicide) and transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land in 1837, where he died a decade later.²

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the modern scientific study of poisons – what became the science of toxicology – and advances such as the identification of morphine in 1814, strychnine in 1818 and reliable tests for arsenic in 1836 and 1841. But these scientific developments, which meant poisons could be more easily detected in victims, seemed to do little to deter domestic poisoners and the rate of poisoning, rising in tandem with the popularity of life insurance, increased until contemporary commentators reported that poisoning was occurring at epidemic levels. Whether there actually was an epidemic of murder caused by the ready availability of such poisons at the end of the nineteenth century is debatable, but this idea was confirmed in the minds of people at the time by the succession of dramatic poisoning trials during the 1890s. The Victorian press sensationalised crime stories to the point of becoming trial judge and jury, and justified this reporting by the public interest they generated.³ Poisoning cases were thus duly written about in gruesome detail, making the crime a topic of daily conversation.

While poison was widely understood to be a particularly feminine weapon – sly, cruel and cunning, with deadly poisons easily slipped into the food and drinks these devilish women prepared – the 1880s and '90s also saw a series of male poisoners brought to trial.⁴ The most intriguing subset of these men for the public were medical practitioners, their crimes so sensational that lengthy reports of their trials were read all over the world, including in Australasia.

One of these was the seemingly upright citizen, Dr. Philip Cross, a 62-year-old retired army surgeon, who lived with his much younger wife and their six children in Ireland. They had been married for eighteen years with no apparent problems until, in 1886, Mrs. Cross engaged a new governess for the children, twenty-year-old Effie Skinner. Falling madly in love with her, the doctor began repeatedly dosing his wife with arsenic and strychnine and, early in May 1887, Mrs. Cross began to suffer violent vomiting attacks. Told by her husband that she had a weak heart, she died a month later, Effie and Cross marrying less than two weeks after the funeral. Cross appeared to show great concern throughout the extended period of his wife's suffering and was much maligned for this hypocrisy when his crime was discovered. He was hanged in January 1888, Effie so shocked when she discovered her unwitting role in the murder, that she refused to visit her condemned husband in gaol.

As the 1890s opened, the seemingly mild and suave Dr. Hermann Webster Mudgett, known not only as 'Dr. Holmes' but also as 'the Black Baron', purchased a row of turreted, three-storey buildings in Chicago. While the ground floor was filled with rented-out shops and the top floor housed his own offices and living quarters, Mudgett rebuilt the middle storey into a maze of windowless, airtight and soundproofed torture rooms. These were complete with secret doors, peepholes and gas poisoning facilities. Most spine chilling was his system of chutes running down into a basement quicklime pit. Over a period of three years, Mudgett attracted a steady stream of young women with advertisements promising lucrative employment in his hotel. Once they arrived, however, instead of putting them to work, Mudgett imprisoned and poisoned them, first

obtaining access to their assets and later selling at least a dozen of their skeletons to local medical schools. He also killed a number of men who signed over their insurance benefits to him, and any children who got in the way. When he came under police suspicion, Mudgett protested his innocence despite the fact that, when a newspaper offered him a large fee, he penned a lurid confession to twenty-seven murders, retracting this once he was paid. His luck finally ran out when, while in custody in relation to an unrelated murder in Philadelphia, his hotel caught fire and the remains of more than a hundred bodies were found. Mudgett eventually confessed to twenty-eight killings and six attempted homicides, stating that, while largely motivated by profit, he would sometimes kill just for the pleasure of hearing his victims' screams. The first serial killer identified in the United States, Mudgett was hanged on 7 May 1896. As per his request, his coffin was embedded in cement as he feared his body might be disinterred by souvenir hunters or doctors wanting to dissect his brain.⁵

Appetiser: strychnine

Another medical man, Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, was executed in London four years before Mudgett in 1892, having killed, police claimed, at least eight young women in England, America and Canada by handing out strychnine pills that he said were tonics or other medicine. An already convicted murderer on early release from prison, Cream was a dandy who seemed to go out of his way to attract the attention of the police – sometimes giving them information on his victims before foul play was even suspected. He once escaped a charge of bigamy by pleading he had been in prison in Australia at the time of his second marriage, but there is no evidence that Cream ever travelled to the Antipodes.

A bitter alkaloid drug derived from the seeds of the *strychnos nux-vomica* tree, strychnine is native to Australia, India and Sri Lanka, and has been used as a rat poison for more than five centuries. Strychnine can be fatal if swallowed or inhaled, with acute poisoning characterised by violent and painful convulsions that can begin within minutes of ingestion. Other symptoms include muscular cramps (especially in the neck and back), stiff joints, twitching muscles, headache, a feeling of restlessness and a severe restriction of blood-oxygen to the body tissues. This last effect leads to *cyanosis*, where the skin turns blue. The kidneys may fail due to the strain of processing the poison, but death often occurs due to respiratory arrest. This sounds quite peaceful, but is often preceded by such agony that the victim dies screaming in a final convulsion that leaves their body bent backwards until their head almost reaches their feet. Today, non-fatal doses of strychnine are treated by keeping the victim quiet and administering barbiturate sedatives and artificial respiration, but the poison's debilitating effects can linger and affect the sufferer for months or even years.

As a central nervous system stimulant, strychnine works like a toxic appetiser, increasing the secretion of gastric juices and heightening sensory awareness. These qualities caused a strychnine-based medicine known as *nux vomica* to be prescribed in the nineteenth

century as an antidote for narcotic overdose and to treat shock. Solutions of strychnine of various strengths were also commonly used as so-called 'nerve tonics' to increase appetite, improve muscle tone and stimulate weak bladders.

By the 1890s, strychnine was only one of the some one hundred and sixty poisons then classified and capable of being detected, but about half of these were chemical rarities and no more than forty ever really figured as a cause of death at that time, suspicious or not. In 1895, the test for strychnine involved concentrating liquid matter to a drop and placing this on a white porcelain tile. An electric current was then passed through this drop, or a tiny crystal of bichromate of potash dropped into it. After either of these additions, a single one-hundredth of a grain of strychnia (as the poison was also called) caused a gorgeous array of colours to appear in the drop. The first of these was deep sapphire blue, this then becoming violet, purple, crimson and finally lilac blue. This dramatic test was not foolproof, as the colours changed and then vanished rapidly and, in a time before colour photography, no record or proof of the colours could be preserved. The whole test thus depended on the accuracy and reliability of the analyst's observations during the approximately five-minute test.⁶ Today, strychnine is one of the poisons routinely tested for in cases of suspected poisoning.

Entrée: arsenic

Arsenic, the unscientific but popular name for *arsenic trioxide* (As_2O_3), is one of the most ubiquitous of poisons – not only virtually undetectable and deadly, but occurring in a wide range of locations in our environment, whether natural or industrial. It is released into the air by volcanoes, when arsenic-containing minerals and ores weather and break down, and by a range of commercial and industrial processes. Some groundwater naturally contains arsenic, as do a range of commercial products including wood preservatives, insecticides, weed killers and defoliants, fungicides, cattle and sheep dips, paints, pigments and leaded petrol. Wine and tobacco can contain arsenic if the grapes or tobacco plants are sprayed with arsenical pesticides, and seafood – especially bivalves such as oysters and mussels – certain cold water and bottom-feeding finfish and seaweeds can contain dangerous levels of the poison. Arsenic is also a by-product of the smelting process for many metal ores including lead, gold, zinc, cobalt and nickel, and is used in the production of glass and semiconductors, in preserving wood and animal hides, and as an additive to metal alloys to increase their heat resistance.

The symptoms of arsenic poisoning are nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, headache, abdominal pain, muscular cramping, a weak pulse and, in severe cases, coma and death. Victims suffer damage to the digestive tract and other internal organs as well as a direct attack on the nervous system. Arsenic is excreted from the body mostly through the urine, with complete elimination usually not achieved in less than two weeks, and the faeces, skin and hair often containing lingering traces long after a single small dose. A corpse's hair can, indeed, be analysed many years after burial for arsenic residue, which was how Napoleon's chronic poisoning was determined some 140 years after his death.

Although we are all regularly ingesting tiny amounts of naturally occurring arsenic, even a small overexposure to this poison can cause nervous and motor coordination disorders, respiratory diseases and kidney damage as well as an increased risk of skin, liver, bladder, kidney and lung cancers. Acute poisoning has a mortality rate of fifty to seventy-five percent, with death usually occurring within two days of a lethal dose. The size of this dose depends both on the form ingested and the victim's tolerance, but for arsenic trioxide it is probably in the range of 200 to 300 milligrams – a few specks that are easily hidden in a meal or beverage. This amount can, however, vary wildly, with a dose as small as 20 milligrams life-threatening for some, while others have made an almost miraculous recovery after ingesting as much as 10 grams.

Arsenic has been known and used in various forms since 3000 B.C. but an Arab alchemist, Jabir ibn Hayyan, is believed to be the first to obtain a concentration of white arsenic when he heated the mineral realgar in the eighth century. Before Hayyan, most poisons had strongly distinguishable tastes, odours or colours, but white arsenic was (and is) so insidious because it is unnoticeable, readily available and inexpensive. From the beginning, however, arsenic also had other, more legitimate (although albeit sometimes misguided) uses. Amulets containing arsenic were worn during the Plague as protection from infection, and arsenic was prescribed throughout the nineteenth century for illnesses as disparate as syphilis and malaria, with regular small doses believed to improve breathing when climbing. *Fowler's Solution*, containing one percent potassium arsenite, was a popular over-the-counter cure-all for ailments including arthritis, cancer, deafness, eczema, measles, skin problems, varicose veins and ulcers.⁷ Available from 1786 for over a hundred and fifty years, this miracle cure was even believed to offer relief to those suffering from emotional complaints such as melancholy and jealousy. Users gradually poisoned themselves with this concoction, weakening their health while building up a tolerance to arsenic in the process.

Despite all her fears of her food being poisoned, Queen Elizabeth I used arsenic as part of the toxic preparation that made her face appear chalky white, but it was only from the 1830s that arsenic became widely accepted as a cosmetic. Although she chose laudanum for her suicide in 1862, Elizabeth Siddal, wife and model of painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti, regularly took small doses of arsenic in the belief that it made her eyes brighter and her skin clearer. This practice, called *arsenic eating*, built up the user's tolerance to the poison – and could be utilised by a fearless poisoner, who after regularly ingesting small, but increasing amounts of poison, could safely share a meal containing toxic doses with his or her victim. This fact was used by Dorothy L. Sayers in her 1930 novel *Strong Poison* (1930), which revolves around the ability of a practiced arsenic eater to withstand a dose of the poison that kills his victim.⁸ In 1870, Daniel Brinton and George Napheys warned that an arsenic-eater could exhale sufficient amount of the poison to kill an unsuspecting spouse.⁹

The dangerous practice of using arsenic cosmetically became household knowledge during the notorious Madeleine Smith trial in 1857 in which Smith was alleged to have poisoned her French lover, (Pierre) Emile L'Angelier, on three occasions before finally

killing him. Madeleine was the 22-year-old daughter of a wealthy and well-respected Glasgow family; Emile a poor immigrant. Secretly engaged to Emile, Madeleine was then introduced to the wealthy businessman her father intended her to marry. Upon accepting this second proposal, Madeleine tried to end her relationship with the Frenchman, but he blackmailed her into continuing. Emile was then struck down with a series of severe vomiting attacks, the last of which proved fatal.

At this time, the presence of arsenic could be tested using tissue or fluid samples. If there was sufficient matter to test, it was simply a matter of ascertaining if a piece of copper foil blackened on exposure. If a lesser amount was present, then a solution was made and heated to generate a gas. When this gas was passed through a hot glass tube, a small trace of arsenic (one-millionth of a grain) would create a black smear just above the hottest part of the tube.¹⁰ The week after he died, Emile's body was discovered to contain large amounts of arsenic and, after Madeleine's letters to him were found and it became known that she had purchased arsenic, she was arrested for murder. Her defence – that she had obtained the arsenic *for her complexion* – was accepted and she was freed, but not without stigma, for the jury returned a verdict of 'not proven' on the charge of murder. This was a verdict then unique to Scotland, which states that although the prosecution failed to prove its case, her defence team also failed to convince the jury of the accused's innocence.¹¹

Such was the belief in arsenic's cosmetic benefits that, by the end of the nineteenth century, it was widely used in beauty products, with a popular topical preparation sold under the alluring name of *poudre rajeunissante* or rejuvenating powder. Arsenic was also believed to be a tonic of more value even than iron, and was used to colour sweets and wallpaper. This meant that not only were confectionery factory workers and sweet-toothed children at risk of becoming sickly from arsenic poisoning, so too were middle-class women and girls who spent too long in arsenic-green wallpapered rooms. It has been suggested that such wallpaper may have been one of the factors contributing to Napoleon's demise.

Dessert: thallium

When, in June 1953, Sydney housewife Beryl Hague stirred a spoonful of the liquid rodenticide, *Thall-Rat*, into her husband Allan's cup of tea – *just*, as she said, *to give him a headache* – she was only one in a long series of seemingly ordinary people who used poison – in this case, thallium sulphate – to kill off those they found odious for some reason or other. Thallium poisoning gained a great deal of press coverage in Australia at this time¹² for two main reasons. Firstly, because it was women poisoning their family and friends and, secondly, because the poison's lack of taste, colour and odour (together with its ready availability), made it a slyly lethal addition to the cakes, scones, biscuits and drinks emanating from the 1950's cradle of domesticity – the home kitchen.

The first reported Australian thallium case of the 1950s – when Yvonne Fletcher was tried in September 1952 for the murder of her two husbands with the poison – seemingly sparked off a wave of copycat poisonings, as reported in six sensational trials for thallium poisoning the next year. One of these struck reporters and readers as particularly incredible, when innocuous looking grandmother Caroline Grills, who at 63 was only four feet six inches tall, was convicted of killing three members of her family as well as one family friend in this manner, as well as poisoning as many as another eleven relatives. Sentenced to life in prison for her crimes, Grills lived the remainder of her life in Long Bay Gaol where she was much liked and became known as ‘Aunt Thally’.

Another Australian press sensation was Veronica Monty's poisoning of her son-in-law, the popular rugby star Bobby Lulham, who, it was revealed, had also been her lover. Lulham and his new wife, Judy, lived for some time with Veronica in this ménage à trois, a situation which was then unknown to Monty's daughter. Evidence was tendered that Monty poisoned the sportsman with thallium in a cup of Milo (the popular chocolate milk drink marketed as a vitamin tonic), who became very ill, but that he recovered after an anonymous informer suggested he be tested for the toxin and he was successfully treated. The informer was later revealed to be Monty herself, who admitted the poisoning but claimed it was accidental, as she had, she testified, made the drink intending to kill herself. Although acquitted of the crime, Veronica Monty committed suicide three years later in 1955.¹³

As the symptoms of thallium poisoning do not appear for a week or so after the initial dose, many who had been poisoned in this way did not connect being given the thallium with its later effects. Moreover, as these effects (like other poisons) resembled the symptoms of a range of fatal medical conditions like gastric influenza, stroke, cerebral haemorrhage and pneumonia, there is no doubt that many more victims were poisoned, and died, without arousing any suspicion. With rats in plague proportions in post-war Sydney, the government had lifted restrictions on thallium in order to fight this pestilence, but banned the powerful poison again when these and other cases were publicised.

After dinner: poisoning in the twenty first century

Poisoning has continued to be a prevalent method of murder in the last half of the twentieth century; however, after these mid-century thallium cases, it soon moved from the domestic kitchen, dining table and sick room into the realm of global mass killing. Following a trajectory from the mustard gas attacks of the First World War and the German gas chambers of the Second to the 1978 Jonestown massacre, the 1995 Japanese Sarin gas attacks and a deep fear of chemical warfare as the century closed, poison currently claims a place among the most ‘advanced’ weapon of mass destruction. And, today, as in the past, some poisoners no doubt continue to, literally, *get away with murder*, with the deaths they cause ascribed to natural causes. In addition to this, as in the past, even if detected, a contemporary poisoner may escape conviction on a raft of

legal technicalities as the evidence given in poisoning trials is often bafflingly complex with prosecution and defence medical and forensic experts presenting contradictory medical and other information for juries to contemplate. In a further complication, poisons widely considered to be dangerous continue to be used in everyday life, including medicinally. Arsenic is, for instance, currently employed in advanced cases of *trypanosomiasis*, the disease commonly known as African sleeping sickness and to fight a rare leukaemia, and is also being trialled as a treatment for cancer of the lung, colon and pancreas.¹⁴

As poisons, moreover, continue to be used as pesticides on, and preservatives and colouring and flavouring agents in our foods¹⁵, it may be that many of us are poisoning ourselves just as consistently, and unwittingly, as those women in their nineteenth century arsenic wallpapered rooms.

Endnotes

1. The historical information above about poisons and poisoning, including their use in crimes, and their detection, comes from a range of contemporary and historical sources: Bayer MJ and C McKay 1996 'Advances in poison management', *Clinical chemistry*, 42: 1361-66; Blythe AW 1884 *Poisons: their effects and detection*, Charles Griffin and Co: London; Burney, I 2012 'Poison, detection, and the Victorian imagination', Manchester University Press: Manchester; Dasey, P (ed) 1993 *An Australian murder almanac: 150 years of chilling crime*, Nationwide News: Canberra; Ellenhorn, MJ 1997 *Ellenhorn's medical toxicology: diagnosis and treatment of human poisoning*, Williams and Wilkins: Baltimore; Glaister J 1954 *The Power of poison*, Christopher Johnson: London; Hall, AH 2002 'Chronic arsenic poisoning', *Toxicology letters*, 128(1-3): 69-72; Hallakarva G 1994 *The silent weapon: poisons and antidotes in the Middle Ages* <http://www.floril.egivm.org/files/UNCAT/poisons-art.html> (accessed 22 May 2012); Holstege, CP, T Neer, GB Saathoff and RB Furbee 2010 *Criminal poisoning: clinical and forensic perspectives*, Jones & Bartlett Publishers, Burlington, MA; Kellett, C 2012 *Poison and poisoning: a compendium of cases, catastrophes and crimes*, Accent Press: USA; Main, J 1980 *Murder Australian style*, Unicorn Books: East Melbourne; McGarry, RC and P McGarry 1999 'Please pass the strychnine: the art of Victorian pharmacy', *Canadian Medical Association journal*, 161(12): 1556-58; Olsen, K (ed) 2011 *Poisoning and drug overdose*, 6th ed., McGraw-Hill Professional: New York; Schoolmeester WL and DR White 1980 'Arsenic poisoning', *Southern medical journal*, 73(2): 198-208; Sharpe, A and V Encel 1997 *Murder!: 25 true Australian crimes*, Kingsclear Books: Crows Nest; Sparrow, G 1971 *Vintage Victorian murder*, Arthur Barker: London; Stevens, S and A Bannon 2007 *HowDunit: the book of poisons*, Writers Digest Books; Taylor, AS 1875 *On poisons*, J and A Churchill: London; Thompson, CJS 1931 *Poisons and poisoners*, Harold Shaylor: London; Wilde, O 1889 'Pen, pencil and poison', *Fortnightly review*, January, in *Intentions*, Heinemann and Balestier: London, 1891; repub. in *Intentions*, Methuen and Co., London, 1913: 55-91, <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/E800003-010> (accessed 29 June 2012); Wilson, R 2011 'Chronic arsenic poisoning: history, study and remediation', Harvard University: Cambridge, http://phys4.harvard.edu/%7EWilson/arsenic_project_introduction.html (accessed 29 June 2012); Wood, JG 1937 'Poisons and their history' in K Grant (ed), *Science for All*, Advertiser Newspapers: Adelaide, 73-6.
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5. Larson, E 2004 *The devil in the White City: murder, magic, and madness at the fair that changed America*, New York: Vintage; Schechter, H 2004 *Depraved: the definitive true story of HH Holmes, whose grotesque crimes shattered turn-of-the-century Chicago*, Pocket Books: USA.
6. See, *Truth*, 12 May 1896, 5.
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9. Brinton, DG and GH Napheys 1994 *Personal beauty: how to cultivate and preserve it in accordance with the laws of health*, facsimile ed, Applewood Books, Bedford, Mass.; 1st pub. WJ Holland, Springfield, Mass., 1870, 240.
10. See, *Truth*, 12 May 1896, 5.
11. After her release, Smith left Scotland and moved to London where, four years after the trial, she married draftsman George Wardle, a friend of William Morris. Separating from Wardle some twenty-eight years later, Madeleine migrated to America, married again when she was aged in her seventies and lived in New York until she died of kidney disease at the age of 93. Her story has been told in a number of books, theatrical productions and films, among these David Lean's 1949 masterpiece *Madeline* (also known as *Strange Case of Madeline*), prod. Cineguild, Pinewood and Rank, UK. Recent evidence suggests that L'Anglier may have suicided by poisoning himself, but set the scene in such a way that Smith would be blamed for his murder, see, MacGowan, D 1999 *Murder in Victorian Scotland: the trial of Madeleine Smith*, Praeger Publishers, Connecticut.
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Research statement

Research background

Food writing, a highly visible form of contemporary writing, is attracting scholarly attention (Humble 2005, Driver 2009) and beginning to be defined, classified and explored in terms of literary potential (Waxman 2008). This work is part of a project addressing the food writing domain, proposing that more literary forms of food writing have the ability to communicate a range of technical/health related information – in this case, information about poisons/poisoning.

Research contribution

While Bloom states that food writing is ‘most often upbeat and nurturing, providing successes and triumphs ... for readers to feast on, with occasional glimpses of utopia’ (2008: 346), a key innovation is the use of food writing to illuminate a less than utopian aspect of food provision – poisoning.

Research Significance

The concept that drives this work has already attracted national and international interest, with the author achieving national and international scholarly publication on work on food writing subgenres and their expressive potential. A key significance here is the use of food writing to explicate a scholarly subject, delivering technical information in an approachable form.

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