Motherhood at Table in Post-War Britain: The Family Meal as a Cultural Ideal

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Enid Blyton's novel *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* opens with the Longfield family enjoying high tea. Mother Linnie Longfield is smiling contentedly as she "look[s] at her family sitting round the table, eating the things she had cooked" (5-6). The concept of a family sharing home-cooked food around the table is a widely naturalized image in Western culture; these meals represent a system of values inscribed in family life that promulgate the ideal of a perfect mother serving abundant, well-cooked meals in a situation that 'feeds' her family physically, emotionally and culturally. Such mealtimes are, according to Davidoff et al, "the ultimate test of motherhood" (120).[1] For Linnie, the exemplary wife and mother of this text, her provision of good food is both an expression of good mothering, and a crucial element of maternal identity. Her dining-table is an arena of maternal focus that is a forum for family discussions, a place of family bonding and the customary location for celebrations. The scene is a cultural signifier, one that reappears in all the texts discussed in this chapter. Children's novels are a form of cultural script which can, as Karen Coats and Lisa Fraustino observe (2015), condition the practice of mothering, and such episodes establish the importance of the family meal as a pre-eminent site wherein motherhood is validated.

This chapter provides an innovative reading of the ideological and symbolic function of the family meal in the UK during the post-war period. My consideration of the 'ideal mother' paradigm as both empowering and constraining draws on the empirical research of feminist scholars in their analysis of the role of mothers as food providers. The discussion goes on to investigate the operation of maternal power at both micro (domestic) and macro (societal) levels, utilising Michel Foucault's concept of power relations in an examination of the boundaries of maternal influence. The investigation is informed by

the work of social theorists Roland Barthes and Pierre Bourdieu on the place of food consumption in the transmission of cultural identity and nationhood. I focus on two highly popular twentieth-century British writers of children's literature, Enid Blyton and Noel Streatfeild, and offer a historically contextualized close reading of their novels in order to analyze the maternal subject as meal provider.

In *Popular Children's Literature in Britain* Matthew Grenby seeks to define the "peculiarly slippery" concept of popular literature for children in terms of reader experience; he points out that while the term 'popular' can be understood in literary terms as implying, "the quotidian [and] the ephemeral", it also encompasses narratives that have been "well-liked or commercially successful, or both" (1-2). The child-focused readability of the work of the two authors discussed here has ensured both their commercial success and long-lived reader loyalty. Since 1936 when Streatfeild's first novel for children, *Ballet Shoes*, was published, neither writer has ever been completely out of print, and the ubiquitous Blyton has sold over 600 million copies worldwide. Alongside its broad constituency, popular fiction has an acknowledged potential for reader identification and focalization, especially when written for children (see research by Charles Sarland and J. A. Appleyard), and the works discussed here are, I assert, capable of imaginatively resolving contradictory images of maternity to create divergent subjectivities for the reader. I focus on texts produced in the long 1950s: Blyton's *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* (1948), *Six Cousins Again* (1950), *Those Dreadful Children* (1949), Streatfeild's *White Boots* (1951), *The Bell Family* (1954) and *New Town* (1960).[2] Food rationing during those years was more severe than any imposed previously, and the social conditions were extremely demanding for mothers in their role as food providers. I argue that these popular authors offer constructions of maternity which are in dialogue with society's narratives on the changing maternal role and the re-affirmation of national identity in post-war Britain. Furthermore, while the novels have the capacity to illuminate contemporary motherhood, they also have continued relevance to subsequent configurations of maternity. Food in children's literature, as Wendy Katz (1980) and Carolyn Daniel (2006) have discussed, is a famously iconic symbol of adjustment to the social order and I contend that it is even more significant as a litmus test for the quality and influence of mothering. I show how the semiotics of cooking and eating, defined by Lynne Vallone as the "culinary sign", are played out at the family meal table (47). This space is a locus of cultural stricture where performative motherhood is emblematized and judged, functioning as a demanding measure of idealized motherhood. It can also, I suggest, be construed as a site of influence, where maternal identity and empowerment may be affirmed and where mothers establish familial and societal identity, exercising agency as conduits for cultural conditioning and the awareness of nationhood.

The Good Mother

Food was a major preoccupation of British society in the post-World War Two era from 1945 until the ultimate end of rationing in 1954. In the aftermath of an all-inclusive war, the social, economic and political situation in the UK created fertile conditions for a reconsideration of motherhood, and these years were, according to Ann Dally, "the age of idealization of motherhood" (92). The landslide victory of the Labour Party in 1945, followed by the establishment of the welfare state, heralded an era of social change that was intended to create a new and just society. However, the period was also one of extreme austerity. This was partly the result of accumulated war debts and extensive damage to the physical infrastructure of the country, but was also a continuation of economic decline that had begun in the pre-war era and was accelerated by the post-war loss of empire and waning international power. In 1942 British politician William Beveridge, the social architect of the welfare state, published *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (The Beveridge Report), which became the blueprint for development of post-war society. His introduction declared that "Mothers have vital work to do in ensuring the adequate continuance of the British race and of British ideals in the world" (52).

Beveridge's vision was very much within the context of its time and the reality of a waning empire, but was nevertheless instrumental in creating a climate in which mothers were required to accept responsibility for the enculturation of future generations, alongside the reproduction and feeding of the 'race'. This version of the maternal role was pervasive, and reinforced by prominent 1950s child psychologists, such as John Bowlby and Donald Winnicott. The correlation of the ideal mother-figure with the good society and the well-adjusted child was closely linked to her role as food-giver. Her responsibilities in feeding her children were, according to such theorists, far more than the basic task of putting food on the table; they were crucial for the child's healthy development towards individual adulthood. In offering nourishment, both physical and emotional, to her children, the mother exercises responsibility for the type of persons they will become. Intimidating standards were created for this maternal nurture. In moulding the corporeal and psychological development of their children, mothers were exhorted by Winnicott to "Enjoy yourself! […] the mother's pleasure has to be there or else the whole procedure is dead, useless and mechanical" (*Child and Family* 26-27). In a 1946 talk on delinquency Winnicott used food-based metaphors to designate maternal deprivation as a root cause of youth crime: "Put it this way. When a child steals sugar he is looking for the good mother, his own, from whom he has a right to take what sweetness is there" (111).

The food motif, representing good mothering and good food as synonymous, appears frequently in post-war cultural texts – maternal quality is evaluated by and celebrated through the medium of food provision. Expert advice was considered crucial in facilitating the desired outcome for both society and individual. In a 1945 speech urging continuing

involvement of the government in feeding guidance for mothers, Lord Woolton, the influential wartime Minister of Food, who managed the successful food rationing system, declaimed:

> The young need protection and it is proper that for them the State should take deliberate steps to provide it. […] Food must be chosen in the light of knowledge of what a growing child needs for the building of a sound body. And when food has been well-chosen, it must be well-cooked. This task calls for the highest degree of scientific catering; it mustn't be left to chance. (qtd in Hardyment 12)

Food was thus simultaneously a powerful socializing agent, a marker for the psychological quality of maternity, and a political tool. Acceptance of the family meal as the criterion of good motherhood has been confirmed in later sociological studies; the 1980s mothers interviewed by Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr informed researchers that: "a proper meal is […] where everybody will sit down together and take time over eating a meal and do it properly" (20). In their furnishing of the product that literally and metaphorically sustains the family, these women interviewees felt judged, by themselves and others, as good or bad mothers according to the quality of food they provided and how it was served and consumed.

The Bell Family and White Boots

Streatfeild's 'Bell Family' duology mirrors and reinforces this traditional model of motherhood, assuming conflation of the good cook and good mothering. *The Bell Family* and *New Town* chronicle day-to-day events in the nuclear family of vicar Alex, wife Cathy, their four children, Esau the dog, and the daily helpmeet Mrs Gage. The obligation to provide a 'proper' cooked meal in compliance with the prevailing good mother paradigm is illustrated by a dining-table scene in *The Bell Family,* when Cathy, generally constructed as the 'good' mother of this text, fails on this occasion to create an acceptable meal for her children. On a hot day Cathy has "tried to please the family by preparing a cold breakfast. She had made a brawn" (183). However, as she explains worriedly to Mrs Gage, "I read in a paper that all the family would love it, but it doesn't seem to have turned out right somehow" (183). In response to Mrs Gage's ill-concealed horror at "what seemed to be a cross between cold soup and a half-jellied jelly […], Cathy shuddered. 'Don't Mrs Gage, dear. I had already taken a dislike to it, but now it makes me feel sick'" (183). At the dining-table, the children respond predictably. Well-behaved eldest Paul politely enquires "I thought brawns stood up", while outspoken middle-child Ginnie pushes her plate away, declaring "To me it looks as if it was something somebody had eaten, and…"

(185). Eventually the more sensitive Jane speaks for them all:

> "Don't wear your suffering-martyr face, Mummy. We know you meant it to be a nice cold breakfast, but, darling, we can't eat it, honestly we can't. […] How about letting Esau have this?" (184-5)

Esau also rejects the dish, which ends up in the pig bucket. Cathy's identification with the food she has brought to table signifies its role as a test of good mothering and her own internalization of normative motherhood. She takes her maternal food responsibilities seriously, as evidenced in her newspaper search for appetizing recipes. As Winnicott argues, the offering of food is psychologically significant, being both a symbolic representation and a practical demonstration of maternal love, so its rejection has significance beyond that of poor cooking technique. Cathy's "suffering-martyr face" indicates her internal distress that she has this morning failed to fulfil her nurturing maternal role; the rejection of the brawn that refuses to "stand up," which even the dog, let alone her children, will not eat, temporarily consigns Cathy's maternal self-image to the pig bucket.

In her representation of maternal quality Streatfeild deploys oppositional tropes; her "good" mother constructs are invariably presented alongside exemplars of inadequate mothering. The ideological power of such binary oppositions as a narratological technique lies in their simplistic counterpointing of the characters, which labels the values implicit to the text. While Cathy's brawn fails for once to meet the received ideal, her wealthy sister-in-law Rose Bell delegates cooking entirely to paid servants and prioritizes her social life over presence at family meals. Rose, whose main interests are her clothes and foreign travel, is relentlessly portrayed as shallow and unaware of her daughter's needs, either nutritionally or emotionally. "Aunt Rose was out a lot, and Veronica left to herself had to find her own amusements" (195). Nine-year-old Veronica "hate[s] being parked first here and then at home" when her parents holiday abroad and "cried if anything was refused her" (75/23). It is clear that Rose's withdrawal from the family table and domestic life signifies the emotionally inadequate mothering that has produced a lonely and immature daughter.

A similar binary opposition depicting maternal alienation from cooking and absence from the dining-table as a marker of poor motherhood appears in *White Boots*. Ten-year-old Lalla lives with Aunt Claudia, her official guardian, and Nana, a totemic Streatfeild nannie-mother-substitute. Unsympathetic Aunt Claudia's main interest in her ward is as a potential ice-skating champion, and interactions between them focus on this goal, ignoring Lalla's emotional needs. Like Rose Bell, Claudia employs staff to cook, only entering the kitchen to give instructions on Lalla's restrictive diet regime, designed to remove the "naughty curves" that could hinder Lalla's skating prowess (92). There are

no family meals in this wealthy upstairs-downstairs household, but devoted co-mother Nana 'cooks' for Lalla, sharing the great treat, in their top-floor nursery, of making hot buttered toast in front of the fire. As the oppositional nurturing mother-figure, Nana refutes Claudia's utilitarian attitude to food, declaring, "the moment I see Lalla looking peaky, it's hot dripping-toast for her tea and plenty of it" (95). As foil to the unmotherly and food-restricting Claudia, Nana's abundant provision of shared comfort food marks her as the 'good' mother.

The importance of the family meal-table is further reinforced with the description of mealtimes in the poverty-stricken household of Lalla's friend Harriet. Mother Olivia Johnson's consideration that "perhaps it was nicer to laugh over the funny food you had to eat, than to have the grandest dinner in the world served in lonely state to two people in a nursery" confirms the ideological message of this text (42-3). The enjoyment of familial togetherness and communication at Olivia's dinner table, whatever is on it, foregrounds the values of the mother-centred Johnson household in contrast to the isolated grandeur of Lalla's wealthy home.

The Six Cousins

The message that sharing good food at table connotes the maternal ideal is even more explicit in Blyton's 'Cousins' books. Sisters-in-law Linnie and Rose Longfield are, like Cathy and Rose Bell, juxtaposed as templates of 'good' and 'bad' motherhood. In *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm*, the three town-based Longfield children, Cyril, Melisande and Roderick are sent to live with country-dwelling cousins after the family house is burned down. The conflicts that arise between the two sets of siblings are attributed to their contrasting experiences of mothering, and maternal quality is specifically expressed through each mother's competence at cooking and familial presence at table. The comparison is most marked in a Christmas dinner scene. Times of celebration, such as birthdays and Christmas, are, according to Charles' and Kerr's empirical research, particular flashpoints for measuring maternal worth, so this calibration is especially pointed. The family now have a new home, but as Rose decides "she didn't really feel up to coping" with Christmas, she and her family are invited by Linnie to Mistletoe Farm (61). The description of the celebration spread is linked directly to an appreciation of Linnie's maternity:

> The dinner was magnificent. "You're the best cook in the world! Goodness knows what you do with a turkey to make it taste like this", said Mr Longfield [and] called out a toast. "To Linnie – all our love – we couldn't do without her!" The children raised their glasses and shouted at the tops of their voices. "Mummy! My love!" "Best mother in the world!" (63-64)

The affiliation of Linnie's food-table with her mothering role is counterpointed by the implied narrator's description of the internalized reaction of Rose, who is excluded from such appreciation: "Would anyone ever toast her like that, with delight and joy and love? She couldn't help feeling just a little bit doubtful" (65). The point is emphasized by niece Susan remarking "I shouldn't think you could boil an egg, could you, Aunt Rose?", while Rose's husband David "turned jovially to his wife. 'It's a pity *you* can't cook like this, Rose,' he said" (63). As Daniel points out, "it is often the case that food is used to make implicit judgements about a woman [...] including her capacity to love and nurture, and her willingness to sacrifice herself for her family," a judgement made brutally clear in the family's tactless comparisons between Rose and Linnie (108).

The imagery of Linnie's bountiful table is the more powerful since this plenitude was a rarity in the time of austerity. Such idealistic constructions of motherhood, encompassing culinary abundance and maternal competence, occupied an influential place in post-war domestic discourse; as Woolton had stated "Feeding is not enough, it must be good feeding [and] it must be well-cooked" (qtd in Hardyment 12). It is significant to Blyton's message that Rose is ultimately afforded redemption via culinary skills; when her cook and maid walk out, she is faced with the choice of either providing family meals herself or leaving the farm and her family. In accordance with the alignment of table meals and good motherhood, Rose's production of a plentiful farmhouse high-tea, with "cheese and ham and all" that the family eat together around the table, signifies the character's ultimate transformation from 'bad' to 'good' mother (154). This narrative reversal confirms the relevance of food in evaluating motherhood and positions the *Six Cousins* duology within contemporary maternal discourse. As in Streatfeild, the performance of the mother as cook and at table is crucial to an approved model of maternity The importance of family mealtimes, key to the explicit ideology of these texts, is an overtly discursive contribution to the construction of the motherhood ideal.

The values promulgated are, however, occasionally subject to question in textual glimpses of less-obvious effects of compliance with the ideal on the quality of maternal life. The representation of Linnie as a model 'good' mother – she "took it for granted that these things were her job, to be done well and lovingly for her husband and children, and she did them, and was happy in the doing" – is an example of Blyton's explicit ideological message that is contradicted in the narrative (69). Linnie's acceptance of normative maternity involves a denial of her wider interests, and the service aspects of her role are evident when her husband shouts for his lunch: "'Linnie! LINNIE! Do come here!' [...] 'Can you get me some sandwiches quickly?'" (59). This summons leads Linnie to confess to her bookish nephew that her love of music and literature has to be denied: "poetry hasn't much place in my life now, Cyril, with so much to do and think of" (59). Streatfeild's Cathy is similarly limited; a keen gardener, she is constrained by her maternal foodwork

duties to "let the garden she had dreamed of making drop. There are no time-spenders like gardens, but she had meant to sneak some. Now […] she knew she had been wrong" (220). Dedication to servicing family meals may be an overt marker of good motherhood, but, for both these characters, it involves personal sacrifice. So, the 'explicit' values of the texts are overtaken by an unexamined ideology. The "powers of reinforcement vested in […] unconscious ideology" should not be underestimated, and the conflict revealed beneath Linnie and Cathy's acquiescent compliance with the motherhood ideal allows for contradictory readings (Hollindale 13).

Such contrasting representations of maternal lifestyle have the potential to undermine surface depictions of contented motherhood in ways that could influence the subject position of the implied reader. Furthermore, the simplistic construction of 'good' and 'bad' mothers opens these narratives to resistant reading which, as Judith Fetterley discusses, "make possible a new effect" on the reader that may "in turn provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects" (xx). Adrienne Rich describes this process as one of "re-vision – of seeing with fresh eyes [and] from a new critical direction", that empowers readers in the process of constructing their own subjectivities (18). The covert acknowledgement of the price of acquiescent compliance with normative maternity constitutes an alternate strand of the contribution these texts make to maternal discourse, opening possibilities of a challenge to the received maternal ideal.

Power and Maternal Identity

In her discussion of *Food, Consumption and the Body*, Sarah Sceats asserts that food is "not bound within any single discourse but *impregnated with meanings from the many and various frameworks* within which it figures" (126 my emphasis). While food matters are a demanding measure of the maternal ideal in the texts, they can also be construed as a Foucauldian ingredient of power, both at the micro-level of the dinner table and the macro-level of national reconstruction. Foucault's exploration of the microphysics of power in *Power/ Knowledge* – its "capillary form of existence" – is especially relevant to the position of mothers; it can be applied to their control of bringing food to table, their insistence on culturally-acceptable table-manners once there, and ultimately to their political influence (39).

In the post-war years, when food strategies were intrinsic to the political and economic recovery of nation-states, maternal feeding responsibilities became a revealing indicator of the power structures in operation at micro and macro levels. This political aspect of food provision as a primary tool for restructuring the UK created conflicting positions for mothers, who bore the brunt of the practical effects of restrictions imposed by the severe rationing of the long 1950s. As Townswomen's Guild member Constance Hill declared: "the smiling mother of yesterday is the bad-tempered mother of today

[...], we are under-fed, under-washed and over-controlled" (qtd in Hinton 133). The food controls, which exceeded wartime conditions, were imposed by parliament for economic reasons, but even the ultra-patriotic Blyton was moved to protest, sending "'Lament of a Housewife"' to the national press when bread rationing was proposed in the wake of a disastrous 1946 UK wheat crop:

> Has no M.P. an angry wife
> Who threatens with a carving knife,
> And vows that if he rations bread
> She'll see the boys and girls are fed,
> And he must give up half his share
> Because HE makes the cupboard bare?

Resentment over the long hours mothers spent queuing for food was the catalyst for the establishment of the British Housewives' League in 1945; initially they collected 17,000 signatures from so-called 'ordinary housewives,' which were presented to parliament in protest against the prevalence of queues. Working within groups such as the BHL, mothers remained highly vociferous in the ongoing protests around food supplies, collecting 600,000 signatures on a petition for government protesting bread rationing. There was a political outcome to this maternal discontent; the bread rationing scheme was suspended, and food protests played a role in a surprising reversal of political ideology in the country at large. In 1951, and notwithstanding its establishment of the much-valued welfare state, the Attlee Labour government was soundly defeated by the Conservatives under Winston Churchill – who had declared that he would fight the election on "houses [and] red meat" (qtd in Hardyment 38). As one mother expressed it, "the election was lost mainly in the queue at the butcher's or the grocer's" (qtd in Pugh 291).

So, although maternal food responsibilities could and did become oppressive, their very importance in the national and political realm also, paradoxically, enhanced the status of mothers, enabling them to exert influence in the public arena. The role of food as a cultural signifier of burgeoning public power was also reproduced in the private realm; foodwork struggles of mothers at the practical level of bringing food to the table had unintended consequences in enhancing the influence over others that Carole Counihan describes as "a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connections to and influence over others" (52). The difficulties of cooking appetizing meals with limited, often unappetizing ingredients, alongside the need of good nutrition for children, was addressed across the media, a staple feature of magazine articles, government advice pamphlets and broadcasting directed at mothers. When *Woman's Hour* was introduced to BBC radio in 1946 as "a daily programme of

music, advice, and entertainment", it always included food advice. The tradition was ongoing – in 1953 listeners were entertained by a talk on 'How to Buy a Cabbage' (*Radio Times*). Limitations to the foodstuffs available inevitably exacerbated maternal problems in providing acceptable meals, and the government advocated unusual foods, such as whale meat and pigeon, to swell rations in the face of increasing shortages. The infamous canned snoek, a barracuda-like fish, was imported as a replacement for canned salmon, but overly optimistic governmental advice, and recipes such as "'Snoek Piquante,'" failed to convert mothers.[3] The Ministry of Food, operative from 1939 until 1955, was central to this discourse, and state directives on feeding children continued into the 1950s and beyond. As in other areas of maternal practice 'expert' opinion, predominantly male, took precedence over practical experience; mothers, it was assumed, no longer knew best. Consequently, well-meaning intentions to create a "healthy generation, guarded by regulation orange juice, halibut-liver oil and milk" were often seen as official interventions questioning maternal competence; an uneasy relationship between mothers and state was being forged over dinner (Cooper 36). Yet the plethora of advice and recommendations in this intense focus on mothering – a belated recognition of the vital function mothers performed in putting food on the table – ultimately elevated their role.

In her essay "Deciphering a Meal", social anthropologist Mary Douglas explores how the work of feeding the family utilizes food to organize people and activities, showing that the power structures in operation within the family can be defined by its food habits: "if food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of relations being expressed" (61). The feeding role of mothers thus illuminates the operation of familial power dynamics; food, being essential to physical survival, and important in creating psychological attachment between mother and child, inevitably confers power on the food-supplier. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault asserts that power does not invariably operate negatively, as it would then become self-defeating:

> If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted [is] that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network. (119)

The status of mothers that is implicit in their control of food matters can be considered as a Foucauldian "productive network," one that "induces pleasure," "traverses and produces things" and influences discourse. The food power of mothers in the fictional texts mimics this reality as a form of influence that reinforces maternal identity while creating a coherent cultural identity for the family and its members.

Marjorie DeVault concludes in her study *Feeding the Family*, based on her detailed empirical research with a diverse range of families in 1980s Chicago, that setting-up the meal and arranging for all family members to sit down and eat it together, actually *produces* the family, bringing together its individual members from their separate activities into a "consciously crafted structure of family life" (78). Mealtimes create "times of coming together that are thought of – although not entirely consciously – as *making a family*" (78 my emphasis). The situation governing cooking and serving the family meal transcends geographical and temporal boundaries and continues to be an important marker for maternal identity and status. The meal-table is a place of familial cohesion, a site where the exercise of maternal power, as a 'productive' tension between pleasure and control that "forms knowledge [and] produces discourse", is seen to be played out.

The Private and Domestic Realm of Family Meals

Accordingly, the cultural work of the texts in establishing a logistic of maternal power is most evident in their depiction of the domestic realm of the family meal-table. The first paragraph of *Six Cousins at Mistletoe Farm* is a classic model of what Katz refers to as "the extent to which tea-time in particular is used to dramatise states of harmony or disharmony" (193). It reveals the construction of the maternal figure as lynchpin of the family:

> It was half-past five one April evening at Mistletoe Farm. In the big sitting-room sat five people, finishing high-tea. Three children sat at the table with their father and mother. Mrs Longfield was half-smiling now as she looked at her family sitting round the table eating […]. She liked this time of the day best of all, when she had the whole of her family there together in peace. (5-6)

Linnie's power over the table is metonymic of her empowered status in the family, and such scenes are a repeated trope in Blyton's work. The meal-table scenarios are positive exemplars of maternal power in that they serve to establish the cultural identity of the family group, a positive Foucauldian "productive thing" that "induces pleasure" and is "held good" by family members.

When maternal power is not exercised effectively, meals at table can demonstrate a more problematical familial dynamic, while a fragmented meal, where individuals eat separately, has disruptive power; it is indicative of the troubled family. In *Six Cousins Again*, Mr Longfield initially delights in the vision of his family having their first meal in their new home: "What a glorious sight! […] It was wonderful to see you all sitting round the table like that" (23). However, problems become evident when ten-year-old Roderick, horrified

by the scarce quantity of food his mother has provided, first protests, and then leaves to eat in the scullery; he continues to eat separately from the family. The fragmentation of family mealtimes accelerates when incompetent cook Rose fails to produce dinner, and her husband also absents himself from the table:

> "If I don't get something to eat soon I shall have to go out without anything," said Mr Longfield. "For goodness sake – does it take an hour to get a bit of meat and potato and bread and cheese on the table?" In the end he got a hunk of bread and cheese for himself and marched off angrily. (109)

This breakdown of mealtimes reveals the splintering of familial power structures as both Roderick and his father choose to exercise individual authority over where they eat. Mr Longfield's dinner and Roderick's teas, eaten away from the table "on a tray anywhere he liked", indicate the damaging fissures in family structure that open up in the face of ineffectual maternal power (70). Lacking food skills, Rose cannot hold the family together at mealtimes, and the locus of power shifts from a communal meal-table, anchored by maternal presence, to sites of isolation, such as farmyard and scullery, occupied by disaffected individuals rather than a cohesive group. Sister-in-law Linnie eventually comes to the rescue "with her hands full of food [and soon] everyone […] was sitting around the table tucking into ham and sausage rolls and cheese and cake [with] lots of talk going on!" (114). "Lots of talk" affirms the family table as a space for communication, and the message is that, with food consumed around the table in the presence of a mother, familial fragmentation could be repaired.

Since the refusal of Rose to conform to the good mother paradigm (as exemplified by Linnie) diminishes her maternal role to the extent that she is powerless to unite her family, she suggests they leave the farm and return to the town life she prefers. When neither her daughter nor her sons agree to leave with her, Rose, "staring into the darkness, realized that she couldn't do without them" and makes the "tremendous resolve" to adopt the conventional motherhood role modelled by her sister-in-law (152). Her subsequent belated compliance with the cultural ideal is expressed in her provision of a "really good high tea, just like Mistletoe Farm" that restores cohesion to the divided family, just as Linnie's meal had done previously (154). While they are now, Roderick declares, "a proper family again," Rose's reinstatement at the hub of family life comes at a personal cost (158). As with Linnie's renunciation of poetry and Cathy's rejection of gardening, Rose is constrained by motherhood to deny herself the urban life she yearns for. Yet again, the overt message that maternal empowerment requires conformity to a traditional model of motherhood is implicitly questioned, allowing the reader to invoke resistant as well as complicit readings.

The family meal is revealed as a different engine of power in the maternal duty to impose codes of proper behavior at table. As Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard note, "the rituals of eating and the rituals of the table are compact metaphors for the power […] inherent in family dynamics" (132). In the texts it is the mother-figures who exercise such power, while fathers are generally detached, focusing on non-domestic work responsibilities – Blyton's Mr Longfield "eat[s] quickly, frowning as he thought of all the work to be done [and] rarely said anything at mealtimes" (*Mistletoe Farm* 5-6). Similarly, Streatfeild's Alex Bell "turn[s] over his letters" at the breakfast-table while Cathy imposes the rules: "this is breakfast-time, and you three ought to be sitting on your chairs at the table" (*Bell Family* 166). Such maternal inculcation of table manners establishes what Bourdieu describes as cultural capital, "the expression of a habitus of order, restraint and propriety which may not be abdicated" (196). Bourdieu deploys the term "habitus" to encapsulate ways in which individuals are socially positioned; meal-time rituals, "the manner of presenting and consuming food, the organization of the meal", are, he avers, "an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement" (196). In Charles and Kerr's 1980s research on food and families the mothers regarded good table-manners as vital for ensuring children are socialized into their prevailing culture and class and become acceptable to the adult world. Reinforcing Bourdieu, they said that "it was important for a child to learn table-manners [...] so that their behavior was socially acceptable" (21). Over twenty-five years later these findings were replicated in the investigations of Kate Cairns and Josee Johnston, whose study concludes that "children's food practices are widely seen to reflect the success or failure of mothers' socialization efforts" (67). The 1950s children's texts engage with an ongoing maternal discourse that positions mothers firmly in the role of cultural arbiter. In transmitting values of family, class and society the dining-table is a location, ideally presided over by both parents, but controlled by the mother, in which family members come to internalize those values.

Nationhood at Table

Maternal exercise of the microphysics of power through control of table-manners extends beyond the domestic realm into the macro-areas of class and national identity. In the post-war embourgeoisement of British society, facilitated by slowly increasing economic prosperity and the socially supportive welfare state, middle-class values were held to be desirable for a unified national identity and "there was greater emphasis on the desirability of extending middle-class taste and standards" (Wilson 125). As Barthes demonstrates in *Mythologies*, food consumption is a vehicle for the transmission of ideology that is infallibly linked to social and national identity. The participation of the texts in promotion of the manners and mores of the unifying middle-class ideal through the conduit of polite table-manners grounds them in contemporary establishment of the more egalitarian society

that was held to be necessary in re-creation of post-war nationhood.

The ideological function of table-manners is affirmed in *Those Dreadful Children*, another Blyton text that features binary depictions of mothers. The English Mrs Carlton and the Irish Mrs Taggerty each create a different habitus wherein the dining-table is established as a metaphor for class and nationality. The mothers have different views of appropriate mealtime behavior, as the lively but undisciplined Taggerty children are dismayed to discover when they go to tea with their new neighbors, the polite, ultra-conventional Carltons. Asked to wash their hands before eating, and to shut their dog outside, they horrify Mrs Carlton by their behavior:

> They really had no manners at all at table. They never passed each other anything. They didn't wait to be asked to take this or that, they just stretched out and took it. They didn't say please and they didn't say thank you. They were certainly not at their best at meals. […] "How dreadful they are!" thought Mother. "Why weren't they taught their manners?" (48)

A subsequent teatime in the Taggerty household, however, reveals unexpected advantages to Mrs Taggerty's laissez-faire expectations. Despite her failure to impose polite manners on her family, she provides prodigious quantities of food, an infallible Blytonesque marker for positive motherhood. In contrast to the scanty Carlton tea, the children feast on:

> Thick buttery slices of bread […] fruity home-made cake, and the slices were enormous ones. Margery couldn't help comparing them to the thin little slices they had at home. These big, thick slices looked rude and greedy, but they really were lovely and big when you were hungry. (69-70)

The culturally stereotypical contrast between Irish Mrs Taggerty, "a big plump woman, with untidy hair" and English "neat, well-dressed Mrs Carlton" underlines the class and national identity issues that are emblematized at the meal-tables (19/88). The racist undertones of this crude stereotyping (not untypical in Blyton's fiction) are here expressed through food as well as appearance and behavioral expectations. Mrs Taggerty's "thick buttery slices" of bread compared to Mrs Carlton's "thin little slices" are inferential of the differences in social class and nationality revealed in modes of consumption as discussed by Bourdieu. However, the maternal binary is not so clear-cut, unlike the stark antithetical representation of the pairs of mothers in the Bell Family and Six Cousins series. Mrs Taggerty may be untidy, but she is also, as evidenced in her generous food provision, a demonstrative and loving mother whose children "clung round her" (88). The neat Mrs Carlton imposes polite table-manners, but is also a "stuck-up" mother who has raised

"namby-pamby and priggy-wiggy" children (38). In the configuration of manners and class this story echoes Victorian moral tales, such as those by Mrs Molesworth or Charlotte M. Yonge, emphasizing notions of duty, self-sacrifice, contrition and self-improvement. The "rude and greedy" Taggerty children are reformed through family misfortune and religious observance. Acknowledging "how rough we were, we didn't even know our table-manners!", the Taggertys finally adopt the Carltons' more formal patterns of behaviour in order to please their mother after she has an accident (152). And ultimately each mother comes to appreciate the other's positive qualities, and their cultural differences are merged in mutual recognition of shared values. The overall message is that manners do matter, being important in promoting social cohesion, and that it is the mothers' role to impose these, in order to reinforce the national values common to both their cultures.

Barthes' 1957 essays on wine and steak as foodstuffs which acquired mythological significance as "alimentary sign[s] of Frenchness", while milk is "now the true anti-wine", establish associations of food and nationality that emphasize how cultural investment in particular foods enhances their importance (60-64). The fact that "the Carltons always had milk for tea at home" is an indication of their quintessential Englishness; eating such foods signifies their participation in familial and national identity (70). Although Blyton was at her most prolific in the UK period of extreme rationing between 1945 and 1954 (publishing forty titles in 1951 alone), her meal-tables do not acknowledge external reality. The sugar-laden spread on Annette Carlton's party table, with "ice-creams, and crowds of cakes and jellies and blancmanges and a big birthday cake", is nevertheless typically Blytonian, offering a plenitude of archetypally English foods that signify a vision of restored Britishness equivalent to Barthes' Francophone symbols of red wine and steak (99).

The markers of nationhood that feature at Streatfeild's meal-tables are more realistic, featuring edible symbols of 1950s austerity such as bread-and-jam. Cathy Bell first appears "spreading jam on bread" (*Bell Family* 23). Despite rationing, these iconic foodstuffs were always available, being filling, cheap and, crucially, home-produced – using British wheat with home-grown fruit and sugar-beet for jam. The ubiquitous bread-and-jam teas serve as Barthesian signifiers of nationality, representing "the mental life of a given society [and] constituting information" regarding the endemic drabness and shortages of post-war Britain (*Psychosociology* 29). Since the Women's Institutes had elevated jam-making into a rousing symbol of British national unity and survival in adversity, the foods also evoke a proud imagery of positivist nationalism. By providing such meals, the mother-figures enact a powerful re-establishment of national identity, operating at the domestic micro-level of the family table to feed into the macro-level of re-building the nation-state. The characters are in effect consuming their national culture, upholding both family and nation; their meal tables combine physical nourishment of "the British race" with potent

edible symbols of nationhood symbolic of the continuance of "British ideals in the world" (*Social Insurance* 52).

In delineation of maternal responsibility for the content and conduct at meal-tables, both authors engage with contemporaneous notions of received middle-class values as a socially cohesive force. Insisting on certain behaviours and provision of appropriate foods, mother characters formulate an awareness of class alongside national identity for their children. As two-way conduits for societal and institutional power, their influence at mealtimes contributes to social cohesion, ensuring the future of the rebuilt nation-state. It is through the creation of such cultural capital that the power of maternal influence is realized. While the habitus of the family meal is a context in which maternal identity is affirmed, they are also "structuring structures [that] implement distinctions between what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong" (Bourdieu 170-2). In a social climate where food was an important factor affecting political stability, family meal-tables became key to national images of unity and strength, inculcating the healthy (and thus powerful) nation that politicians were so eager to convey to the world. The control of this iconic site illuminates the micro (domestic) and macro (societal) power of mothers; their "capillary" exercise of power at the dining-table flows into the larger blood-vessels and arteries of social and national influence. In overcoming the practical constraints of food responsibilities to build psychologically strong and physically healthy families, mothers are shown as essential operators in the creation of a stable, politically healthy and powerful nation.

Conclusion

The image of mother and family at table carries connotative meanings. As a semiotic tool the family meal in these texts is a revealing signifier for constructions of maternity, quality of mothering, and the power of mothers to enculturate their children. Mealtimes represent a system of values inscribed in family life that elevates the status of mothers, while showing that, as creators of a stable present and investors in a positive future, they have an impact beyond domestic confines. At a time when food matters dominated national discourse these stories connect the imagined world closely with reality. Their metonymy marks them as significant participants in the cultural discourse of motherhood, playing a part in constructing the social conditions within which fiction operates, and to which popular fiction, with its wide constituency, makes an important contribution.

Locating these works in a social context serves to confirm the importance of reading such popular texts as a means of accessing the past, uncovering new understanding of post-war discourses of maternity at a significant time for British cultural development. Moreover, later empirical studies such as the 2015 research of Cairns and Johnston demonstrate that we remain ideologically linked to the long 1950s as far as the maternal

role is concerned – in the Western world cultural expectations of mothers have lagged behind socio-economic and legislative change. As the mother's role today, in preparing and bringing food to the table, remains a potent aspect of twenty-first-century maternal discourse, these mid-twentieth-century texts can still have resonance.

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Notes

[1] See empirical research findings of Charles & Kerr; DeVault; Cairns & Johnston.

[2] The "long 1950s" is a concept encompassing the UK post-war era from 1945-1960, as a period characterised by common socio-economic and cultural conditions. See Langhamer, Tinkler.

[3] This recipe title came to symbolise the less-successful aspects of rationing policy.