

Receipts, Remedies, and Reading

Mary Bacon's World: A farmer's wife in eighteenth-century Hampshire

By Ruth Facer.
Threshold Press Ltd, 2010. xvii + 204 pages.
24 B/W + color illustrations. Paperback. £15.00.

Review by Laurie Kaplan.

In this detailed and absorbing book Ruth Facer excavates the life of Mary Bacon (1743–1818), a farmer's wife who lived seven miles north of Alton and whose extended family, the Terrys at Dummer, knew the Austens. From 1789 to 1807 Mary Bacon used her uncle's old ledger to record descriptions of her work and thoughts. She copied into the ledger her own "receipts" (recipes and cures for people and animals), as well as a variety of hymns, almanacs, and chapbooks. She listed the contents of her entire house, including her books. This diary, therefore, presents what is essentially the texture of a farmer's wife's physical activities and spiritual existence.

Married in 1765, Mary and William Bacon settled into 26 years of tenancy, mainly on arable land suitable for hop growing and sheep farming. They had 7 children. From the evidence of her "cures," their farmyard boasted chickens, sheep, horses, bees, pigs, cats, dogs, and, unfortunately, rats and other vermin. The Bacons' mahogany dining table was square, and they had as well a mahogany "teatable." Mary had 7 pillows in her room but only one warming pan in the house. In 1791 she

bought a pair of candlesticks for 7s. The family drank coffee, and they had a copper coffee pot and a mill. Her recipes included Jamaica pepper and anchovies. Best of all, Mary had fifty-nine books. As Facer acknowledges, "It is clear from her inventory and subsequent purchases that she was a woman who entertained, liked to be fashionable and enjoyed her creature comforts."

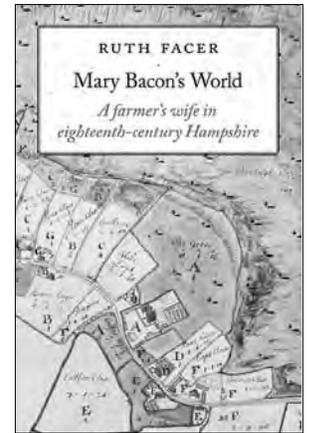
In this diary Mary has written out explicit receipts for feeding and curing man and beast. Her receipt for boiled pudding seems quite modern: eggs, cream, flour, nutmeg, sugar. But her receipt for a cure for urinary tract infections in cows sounds almost barbaric: "Take a handfull of Hog Dung half a pint of Rennet half a pint of Brine a handful of mustard Seed Bruised Simmer it together and Give it the Cow . . . If one Drink fails Stop one Day & Give her another in the morning." Her advice for pickling walnuts is to "Gather your Walnuts when a pin will go through them Let them Lay nine Days in salty Water." Mary used massive amounts of herbs, some of the more unusual being fetherfoy (feverfew), costmary, elicompaine, and torchwort. Creating and collecting her receipts, Mary obviously relished her role as cook-cum-amateur herbalist-cum-physician.

Mary Bacon's list of fifty-nine household book titles will intrigue anyone interested in the reading habits of eighteenth-century women and their families. From Mary's titles, Ruth Facer helpfully attempts to track down each book and to provide an extended description. Mary's

list ranged from Bibles to *The English Physician* (Culpeper) to *The Trial of Col. Despard* to *The mystery of Astronomy* (sic) and included "2 old spelling books" as well as meditations on death and eternity. In addition to books, Mary read newspapers (showing a great interest in the West Indies), almanacs, weather reports, and shipping lists. To demonstrate Mary's interests, Facer summarizes the variety of printed matter she incorporated into her ledger: from agriculture and astronomy to human and veterinary medicine, from education to farriery, from astrology to religion. What is missing from her list of books is imaginative literature. Facer suggests that if Mary read poetry or fiction, she would have borrowed these books from a circulating library, and the nearest one was in Winchester.

One or two errors in the text (for example, that Mary's father James Kinchin was Augustin's [also called Augustine] elder [not younger] brother) do not detract from the comprehensive job Ruth Facer has done by providing the context not only for Mary Bacon's receipts but also for her reading. Along with such books as Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter*, Joanna Martin's *A Governess in the Age of Jane Austen: The Journals and Letters of Agnes Porter*, and Elizabeth Smith's *The Compleat Housewife* (copyright Chawton House Library), *Mary Bacon's World* extends our knowledge base about the activities that made up daily life for women during the eighteenth century.

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"They were of a respectable family in the north of England."

According to the British newspaper *The Daily Mail*, Kate Middleton Windsor, the new Duchess of Cambridge, and Jane Austen share a common 15th century ancestor, Henry Percy, the 2nd Earl of Northumberland, making Kate and Jane 11th cousins, six times removed. Sir John Middleton would no doubt explain their relationship thus: "You are my cousins, and they are my wife's, so you must be related."