

# Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery Oral History Project

## Interview with Theodore Zeldin

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I= Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

T= Theodore Zeldin

Beginning of the interview

I

Yourself and Alan Davidson are really responsible for starting the symposium. Can you give us some of the background and how did you meet Alan?

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I came into food history because I wrote a book called the *History of French Passions*. In that I looked at every kind of passion and every kind of interest and activity that humans are capable of. That included from music halls to committing crimes and one of the things that humans are interested in is food. Therefore, I wrote a very large chapter in the book about the way people ate through hundreds of years. That led to my wishing to introduce that kind of subject into the normal history syllabus. I was a don in Oxford and I tried to expand the curiosity of historians from politics and economics to all the other aspects of life. I started a new special subject which tried to expand this. So when Alan Davidson came along and one heard about his work. He applied for one of the fellowships that my college offered. I managed to get it through despite quite a lot of opposition because it was for a subject which was not much studied by universities. What pleases me now is that it has entered, gastronomy and food, have entered into the subjects that are seriously studied and in the course of these thirty-five years it has established itself and has taken on all sorts of directions. I would like it to take further directions because the great danger which I see as an academic is that academics become specialists in one branch of a subject, in a small branch and when I began and I was an expert, a world expert on a minute, little subject. People still write to me about that. But I think my attitude to life now that I have written books about what should one do in one life. Now obviously one eats in order to live and then what is interesting is that what one eats is also what one talks about when one eats. Brillat Savarin said that the gastronomy of the cooking but also gastronomy of the table. What went on at the table is how people relate to each other and that

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is how my interest has expanded into the context of relationships. Food is one of the elements which can help to create relationships. I was very interested by the talk we have just had on Chinese taste. Every kind of food is worth understanding. I went up to Fuchsia (Dunlop) and asked her what about the things you don't like - what is it that you must not eat. She said something very interesting which is that the Chinese feel, when they feel restricted by taboos about what you must not talk about, that at least in food you can find something interesting in everything. Don't poke your nose into things that might get you into trouble but in food you can find even duck tongues interesting. You can find something good in them. That is what interests me now. Which is how people you disagree with yet have something in them which is interesting and which you can understand. We don't talk to our enemies and that is a great mistake. I remember I met one of the most important Ayatollahs in Iran and for an hour he shouted at me saying how terrible the Americans, the British and the Europeans were. Everybody was terrible and he was really, really angry. Suddenly he finished and a smile came on his face and he hugged me. He said he wanted to come again. I said 'why?' and he said because you listen to me and we don't listen to people. So one has to see how one can develop the capacity to be interested in people even whose face you don't like, whose food you don't like. You have to find what is interesting in it and Fuchsia Dunlop's talk really fitted in quite well with this idea of universal curiosity. This is what this symposium has tried to do, to expand people's interest in other areas like offal. Offal, the talk we just had, has an enormous complexity to it which nobody had thought about. Everything is so complex and ignorance increases as we get more information. Far from thinking we now live in a knowledge society, we live in a society of ignorance, increasing ignorance. This is just one way we can break through it. It is a key into all sorts of different departments of life - animal life, vegetable life and human life, the customs and taboos, the restrictions people place on themselves. Since people cannot live without eating, it is a way in for them to expand their interests. One of the punishments we have received from being increasingly specialist, that we are educated to be specialists saying one branch of inorganic chemistry may have nothing to do another, is that we are shut up, isolated. Isolation is one of the curses of our time as opposed to village life where everybody knew everybody. That was not perfect because you could be dominated, depressed by it, that was why people run away to the city. But we have to find a way where we can appreciate others. This symposium, I hope, is growing and has something much more to contribute in the way that how we eat is very basic and we are not going in the right direction. Because for industrial purposes and for commercial purposes we have in some ways limited people's taste and put them into habits. We have to think also about how we can deal with the question that some people have too little and others too much. Some people have too much and we are in fact killing ourselves by eating the wrong things. So far, I think, the symposium has hesitated to look at

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world problems. This is the argument I used to have with Alan Davidson that I wanted it to be of more universal significance and think how can we make things better rather than just say why things are the way they are? Things could be different. The more one has an opinion of the world as being in a critical condition the more one should be stimulated to say well what can we do. Not to lament and not to promise that we can cure it but to do what scientists do which is to experiment to see what we might try. If it does not work, it probably won't work but we must go on experimenting and try new ways of eating and relating to each other. So there is much to do and I hope that in thirty-five more years we will have the courage to think up ideas which will make a difference to people's lives.

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At the beginning you opened the door, got Alan into St. Antony's and got the thing started. Alan then developed a network of foodies. Did you then match that with philosophers and other academics in through your network and invite them to be interested in food?

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Yes, we did. I remember we invited an Indian historian. We did not know that he was in fact a great foodie because he wrote about economic history. That was (Tapan) Raychaudhuri, a very famous, wonderful historian who alas died a couple of years ago. We found that there was the obstacle that academics are experts about certain subjects and they hesitate to write and to get them to write up what they had to say was quite hard. I think the gap remains and this symposium is very much at the margins of the university. I don't think it has made inroads and the people who come here come from all over the world. One of our achievements has been that the symposium has been copied in various countries and so it is spreading but the penalty there is that they are also quite limited in subject matter. They are isolated from other forms and they don't mix with physicists. We used to have a physicist (Nicholas Kurti) as a member but he was the only one as far as I am aware. He said amusing and interesting things. Why are we not importing people from other subjects because it does touch on a great many other subjects? So there is much more to do. Alan, of course, became very historically minded rather paradoxically because I was the professional historian. I was moving away from professional history and trying to write about the relationship between the past and our capacity to understand how we can think about the future. That second part did not interest him. I think because he had been in the diplomatic service and he wanted to get away from thinking about what one should do. I understand that and I feel that every institution must contain elements of innovation. Otherwise it just becomes repetition.

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How did other people get involved with the organisation of the symposium?

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At the beginning it was very informal. I think at the first occasion there were about six of us. In the same way that my college, St. Antony's, began with six fellows. It was quite accidental we wanted to do international studies and nobody in Oxford was doing it. When I came in as a young student I could not find anyone who could supervise my thesis. So we found people in strange places. That is how we built it up. People heard about it. Elizabeth David heard about it and now of course the restaurant industry has developed enormously and many more middle class people are going into it. It has become a profession whereas previously it used to be a trade. Now, having completed their studies people go into food. Rather interestingly we have not penetrated into hotels. Do you agree with that?

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Yes, or even hospitality as such. We seem to be more about the food and the history not really about hospitality or the business.

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That's right. Now hotels are a huge industry and expanding. Everybody is travelling more. We have not yet hooked onto that and seen that this is a great opportunity for doing what diplomats cannot do which is bringing strangers together. I organise an event every year called the Feast of Strangers where I get people who have never met to talk to each other. I tell them they have to talk for two hours with one person and I give them a menu of conversation. It has had an amazing effect in that people say they are hungry for conversation, they would love to meet people but they are too shy and never have a chance. I think we now have to think about linking up with the hotel industry and the big organisations and say we can do something for you quite apart from improving your food.

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Yes, it might be a suggestion that every second year we explore the themes of food and hospitality.

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There is a problem there because people who come here are experts in particular specialities.

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Except this year there is a hundred new people. We have to analyse the list but I think people who regularly come when they saw the theme Offal said that's not really for me but actually that opened up room for others. Maybe, if we had food and hospitality it might open up for people who would not have thought of coming before

T

Well, I think one should invite people. Just say come and talk for a quarter of an hour to get them interested. No need to prepare anything. We would just like to know what you think. People from the big chains which are so powerful.

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That is true. The symposium and St. Antony's are flourishing and long may that continue. But did you feel that when it moved from St. Antony's, did you step back a little?

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No. The reason why the symposium moved from St. Antony's was that St. Antony's become more bureaucratized and so getting the physical arrangements became too complicated and they wanted too much money. The great problem of all universities is that they want money and they never have enough and a better deal came up. I don't think it mattered. I am not sure that we have a deep connection with this college either. That is yet to be done how to create the link with academia.

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I think the strongest connection we have with the College is through Tim Kelsey the chef. His cooperation with us draws us here!

T

That's right. It is difficult to engage with the academics in the college and that is the priority now, engagement with the hospitality industry. Because there one can see how you can bring a Russian and a Ukrainian together- don't talk about how you are going to fight each other, talk about what you are eating, your families and so on. Then you see that they are human people with interests and fighting them is not the urgent priority.

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Yes, that is the key to world peace that people sit down and break bread together.

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A great obstacle has been that hospitality used to be a duty of the person you visited. He had to put you up for free. It has been commercialised and now you have to pay quite a lot. We have to rethink that because we have really lost something there. We have to think about what we can do about this commercial development. I have tried, in my last book *The Hidden Pleasures of Life* I have written a chapter about hotels. It is called *What Else Can One Do in a Hotel. Not just sleep!* I spent a year with four researchers questioning everybody in the hotel industry. I found that very few of them at least half never really got to know anybody in the town. They just slept there. Why is the hotel not being proactive? Why is it not getting beyond the narrow business of trying to remember whether you like whisky or not? So there is a lot to be done. So if the symposium can bring them in it can contribute to the stability of the organisation. It could bring more finance but it would create a problem of size but there is no reason why it should remain at three hundred people. This is a subject of universal interest. If you found a big hotel they could put you up or we could have special meetings in hotels dealing with hospitality.

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Thank you so much for your time, it has been fascinating.

End of interview.....