

ELIZA ACTON



Cooking and poetry are not necessarily bedfellows in conflict, but their conjunction is unusual. Eliza Acton first wrote poetry, initially publishing in 1826 (and then reprinted), but is best known for her books on cookery. She took up the latter because, it is said, that the publisher William Longman, who had retailed her first book in London, declined to take on another of her poetry books and advised her to move to cookery. Whether he knew of her interest or whether it was simply a traditional sexist call for women to return to the kitchen is not known; but it had its effect.

Looking at her poetry today one can see Longman's point. It is of course of the romantic period, but not of the best – and little if any is in print today whereas some of her (male) contemporaries established great and lasting reputations. It is not likely that this discrepancy derives from the publishers and readers belittling her as a writer because she was a woman, though that might have been part of it. Her verse simply did not stand up to those of others, and in particular lacked the intellectual resonance of their work.

Eliza was born at Battle on 17 April 1799, being baptised at St Mary's on the next 5 June. Her father was John, born at Hastings in 1775, and her mother Elizabeth Mercer of East Farleigh in Kent; John's father was Joseph, a major presence at Hastings and elsewhere nearby, who had married Elizabeth Slatter of Battle. The Slatters were well-known as tradesmen and minor property owners in the town. Joseph's brother in law George was a grocer who also sold china and wines and spirits; George's brother was a butcher. Joseph Acton claimed some affinity with the famous Actons of Tuscany and Naples, but there is no proof of this.

John is in the records as a brewer, though not at Battle; and his entry to that work was through general, and in particular financial, management. This developed after he and his family arrived at Ipswich in 1800 where he became manager of the local brewer Trotman, Halliday and Studd. The records suggest that this was not a puny local business but quite large for the day. In 1803 an inventory showed that it had 63 vats containing 95,940 gallons of beer, with more elsewhere. In 1827, by which time John had been a partner for fifteen years, disaster struck. A local paper reported that John Acton, then residing at Calais, was bankrupt and the business was for sale. (Calais was a favourite bolthole for debtors in the days when a prison term loomed before them.) The auction notice in June 1828 showed the scale of the business: six pubs and half-ownership of another, a house and garden with a frontage of 180 feet, a wharf 224 feet long, and a mill house and brewery and related buildings. It was opposite St Peter's church. As it happened, the buyers did no better, being declared bankrupt a few years later. By 1841 the Acton family was together again, at Grundisburgh, a rather isolated village north-east of Ipswich; John died at Hastings in 1847. The 1851 census had Elizabeth (ex-Slatter) living at 3 Denmark Terrace in Hastings with her daughters Eliza and Catherine. There is also evidence that the family had lived at Bordyke House at Tonbridge after leaving Ipswich.

Eliza was one of the very common large families: at one time or another she had six sisters and three brothers. She appears to have had part of her education in France, which is

surprising because for almost all her first sixteen years Britain and France were at war with each other; and in 1816 she and a colleague founded 'a boarding school for young ladies' at Claydon just a little north-west of Ipswich. This did not last, though we do not know why. In 1819 she and a sister were running a new school at Great Bealings near Woodbridge, which appears to have lasted at least five years. By then she had developed her interest in poetry – inspired, rumour says, by the loss of her engagement to a French military officer – but by 1835 at the latest her interest had shifted.

She wrote four cookery books, all of which have appeared under rather varied titles: *Modern cookery for private families*, *The English bread book*, *Invalid cookery* and *The elegant economist*. All sold well because they addressed the needs of married women running houses for their families without the employment of professional or particularly interested cooks, rather than the needs of professionals preparing banquets in the great houses. They were the first such books to take the reader through the preparation and cooking processes, specifying the type and weight or volume of the ingredients, paying due respect to what was available at particular times of the year and reflecting the fact that with increasing wealth the country was importing all kinds of foodstuffs that were new to the public. She also included dishes that respected the different requirements of Catholic and Jewish cooks. She tested every recipe, unlike the slightly later Mrs Beeton, who appears to have stolen many of her recipes. The books sold very well, and in due course Eliza sold her rights in them to Longman for the sum of £300. Comparing historic and current values is never easy, but in terms of income that would represent about £320,000 today.

Eliza was probably never very well, and she began to ail towards the end of the 1850s. She died at Snowdon House, John Street, Hampstead on 13 February 1859. She is buried in the local churchyard there. A blue plaque has been placed in her memory at the house in Tonbridge. She never married.

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