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The Way of No Flesh

By [EDWARD ROTHSTEIN](#)

In his tireless quest to wean England from meat in the early 18th century, the famously corpulent Dr. George Cheyne set out to poison the novelist Samuel Richardson. It may not really have been a premeditated attempt at murder.

Richardson, who was a literary pioneer with his epistolary novels “Clarissa” and

“Pamela,” so valued the good doctor’s advice that he had every letter Cheyne sent him transcribed and eventually bound into a volume, the way his novels’ heroines might cherish the communications of a handsome rake. And Dr. Cheyne, whom Tristram Stuart calls “the most influential vegetarian in 18th-century Britain” (as well as a man “renowned as a drunken fatso”), may also have really believed that the best way to treat the writer’s cold was with large doses of mercury.

But Stuart suggests that one reason Cheyne deliberately used this deadly treatment on his patients was that it felt so good when it stopped. And it usually stopped just in time for Cheyne to undertake his proselytizing against “Beef-eaters,” “cannibals” and “Flesh-eaters,” luring his weakened patients onto a diet of milk and vegetables with promises of “Purification and Regeneration.” That approach apparently worked with Richardson, though the writer took his revenge on his heroines, who, like him, were torn between desire and discipline, suffering varied forms of trauma while lusting after salvation and fulfillment.

In telling this tale along with a feast of others, Stuart may also have his own prescriptive agenda, though not one as ruthlessly high-handed as Dr. Cheyne’s. In “The Bloodless Revolution,” his suggestive, wide-ranging study of the history of vegetarianism, healthy dollops of skepticism and irony counter hints of the author’s advocacy and allegiance. But who would undertake such an epic study of 600 dense pages — or even review it — without feeling some affinity for its object? Whatever his dietary allegiances, Stuart (who graduated from Cambridge in 1999 and writes for Indian newspapers) certainly exhibits immense learning, the result of attending to obscure pamphlets along with literary masterworks, arcane mystical treatises along with political manifestos, the pronouncements of quacks along with the meditations of scholars.

Indeed, this book’s appetite is so all-engorging and so tirelessly persistent, it does not stimulate easy digestion in others. For long stretches — as Stuart chronicles 17th-century British religious cults, for example — the account can leave one with a leaden feeling that vegetarians might associate with the aftereffects of beef stew. One’s eyes glaze over, the head nods, but the host stubbornly persists, eventually regaining attention with a comment about the vegetarian John Harvey Kellogg’s invention of cornflakes, or an account of scurvy — a disease that proved that in some cases fruit is more important than flesh. But the book would

THE BLOODLESS REVOLUTION

A Cultural History of Vegetarianism From 1600 to Modern Times.

By Tristram Stuart.

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have been still more pungent had it tried to do less, organized itself with more rigor and not placed so many piquant findings in such obscure niches.

Yet once digested, Stuart's argument really does alter perceptions. Though the word "vegetarianism" was coined only in the 1840s, Stuart shows how Western civilization evolved through the values and views of eccentrics, missionaries, doctors, poets and philosophers, all of whom fervently went the way of no flesh. Pythagoras was often cited as a spiritual and dietary model as the debate over vegetarianism entered the West's philosophical mainstream through such figures as Descartes and Bacon. But religion seems to have provided the main counterpoint. After discovering the laws of motion, Newton obsessively sought a primal ur-religion out of which current beliefs developed; had he succeeded in discovering such a law of religious motion, one crucial element would have been vegetarianism. Stuart writes: "Newton passionately wanted his scientific revolution to be accompanied by a bloodless revolution."

By the middle of the 18th century, in fact, vegetarianism had become a secular religion. Stuart describes it as a "countercultural critique" advocated by "medical lecturers, moral philosophers, sentimental writers and political activists." By the 19th century, it had also become linked with French revolutionaries, British nudists and Romantics from across Europe. By the middle of the 20th, fascists were added to the mix. [Hitler](#) would interrupt political meetings to lobby for vegetarianism. Heinrich Himmler was an advocate. Rudolf Hess was so strict that he wouldn't eat the nonorganic vegetables cooked by Hitler's chef — whereupon the Führer, according to one witness, "bluntly informed him that in that case he should take his meals at home."

What, though, is going on here? What connection is there between the refusal to eat meat and the scientific research of the late Renaissance, the health preoccupations of the 18th century or the primal fantasies of 20th-century fascists? It is difficult to see how these strands intertwine.

But it may be that Stuart's idea of "countercultural critique" is precisely right. Vegetarianism, it seems, has always borne the mark of dissent. One of Stuart's most important discoveries is that Western vegetarian ideas were largely influenced by travelers' tales from India. After his 1689 journey, the Rev. John Ovington called India "the only publick Theatre of Justice and Tenderness to Brutes, and all living Creatures." Such accounts administered a kind of shock to the Christian ethos. The Western belief was that only in Eden were animals not eaten. After the Flood came a new covenant. God tells Noah: "Every moving thing that liveth shall be meat for you."

Reports of Hindu holy men unsettled Western complacency: here were pagans whose moral system, uniting Eden and mundane history, gave carnivores no pride of place. The example inspired Western envy, along with utopian enterprises in which vegetarianism was accompanied by heavy doses of moral pride (and hopes for restoration of Biblical longevity). Powerful stuff: when Gandhi came to England in 1888, he was determined to one day convert India away from vegetarianism, convinced as he was that "if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English could be overcome." Instead the British Vegetarian Society, in a return of influence, inspired him to become a "born-again vegetarian."

This was not just about food, nor was it only about religion. A new vegetarian era would be a new political era. The poet Shelley believed that the reason revolutions went awry was meat. "Had Bonaparte descended from a race of vegetable feeders," he mused, the liberator would never have crowned himself emperor.

But there is apocalypse even among vegetarians. John Oswald, the son of an Edinburgh goldsmith, for example, arrived in Bombay as an officer in 1782 and was repulsed by the behavior of his countrymen. He became a strict vegetarian and brought his revolutionary passions to France. As Stuart writes, “His hypersensitivity about animals was matched with an equally extreme aptness for revolutionary violence.” He helped guide the nascent revolution into bloodshed, perfecting the use of the pike for effective killing. Thomas Paine once told him, “You have lived so long without tasting flesh, that you now have a most voracious appetite for blood.”

This is vegetarianism’s lure and vegetarianism’s trap. Along with its heightened awareness of the value of life, it brings a heightened desire to bring a new world into existence. And the greater the ambition, the higher the cost; the greater the purity, the stronger the purge. Many Nazis, as Stuart asserts, “were either vegetarian or interested in related issues” because they, like the Stalinists of the same period, believed they were ushering in a new age, answering to a higher law. But in this quest for lost paradise and in the name of superior virtue and high moral feeling, how many doses of deadly mercury have been fervently administered? It’s enough to make one take up meat.

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