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Memory in Motion: Creating Sticky Memories in Museums

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Abstract

Memory in Motion illustrates the ways that replicating a now-lost culinary practice achieves stickiness through the affective transfer of ideas and experiences for visitors in history museums. It explores how embodied re-enactment both preserves and creates memories, while instilling senses of social value, currency and meaning in the museum, and in heritage more broadly. The work also considers museums, particularly house museums, recipes, and in this instance—sponge cake—as sites of memory and nostalgia, and their contemporary relevance. By interweaving resonant fragments of the museum’s collection and family (hi)stories with a performative activity embedded in memory and motion, we see the development of stickiness through a relational assemblage framework centred around emotional connections to food in the past and in the present, with a view to the future.

Keywords

Sticky Memory; Museum Interpretation; Gastronomic Interpretation; Resonant Fragments; Relational Assemblages

The room is filled with the clatter and clink of cutlery on crockery, as well as mumbles, murmurs and the occasional laugh. A dozen or so people are gathered around a well-worn kitchen table, but these are not sounds from the sharing of a meal. They are whipping egg-whites into ‘snow,’ a term once used for the mass of whites being stiff and dry enough to hold form, using only a table knife and a dinner plate. Oral histories tell us that this was common practice in households before electric appliances became standard domestic items.

The aforementioned snow-makers are visitors to a historic house museum. As a public historian and museum curator, I find food to be a useful way to help audiences engage with and develop personal connections with the past through intellectual and emotional stimuli,

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST While drawing on events and experiences from the author’s employment as a curator at Museums of History NSW, this article is an independent work and any observations or views expressed are the author’s own. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

often in the form of sensory, participatory and social experiences (see also [Levent & Mihalache 2016](#); [Moon 2016](#)). Food is an intrinsic form of cultural and social expression involving all five senses—it is embodied in us materially and emotionally. Drawing on personal impressions of museum visitors' responses to the snow-making activity, this paper illustrates how replicating a now-lost practice as an interpretive device achieves stickiness. It explores how embodied re-enactment both preserves and creates memories, while instilling social value, currency and meaning in the museum and heritage more broadly. The work also considers history museums as sites of memory and nostalgia ([Boym 2007](#)) and the development of stickiness through a relational assemblage framework ([Ahmed 2004](#): 90–91; [Muclahy 2016](#): 220–221), centred around emotional connections to food in the context of the 'needs of the present' and the 'realities of the future' ([Boym 2007](#)).



Figure 1. The Thorburn sisters with relatives in the garden at Meroogal, Nowra, 1916. From left: Georgie Thorburn, Robert Barnet, Tot Thorburn, Belle Thorburn (seated), Kate Thorburn, Elgin Macgregor. Photographer: Robert James Macgregor Barnet (1895–1916). June Wallace Papers, Caroline Simpson Library, Museums of History NSW; © State of New South Wales through Museums of History NSW.

Living Memory

The house known as Meroogal, in Nowra, in the South Coast region of New South Wales, was home to four generations of women from the interrelated Thorburn and Macgregor families, who variously lived in the house from 1885 to the 1970s. Some were widowed, others had never married. Complete with many of their furnishings and personal belongings accumulated over the generations, the house became a museum in 1985, and is managed by Museums of History NSW. Presented as though the family still lived there, much of the museum's focus is on women's domestic and social lives and identity.

Reading the family's surviving recipes and cookbooks, diaries and memoirs, we know that food played a central role in their lives. Of modest means and without the assistance of domestic help, the Thorburn

women, sisters Belle, Georgie, Kate, Tottie (see [Figure 1](#)) and their mother Jessie, while she was alive,¹ performed their own household chores, rising early to cook, launder and clean, tend their garden and feed their chickens. They employed a groom, a Chinese man known to them as George, who lived in separate quarters behind the house, and took care of heavier gardening duties and chopping wood.

The Thorburn women were active in the local community. Once a month on a Monday afternoon, they entertained neighbourhood guests 'At Home,' an afternoon-tea style gathering that was popular at the turn of the twentieth century. Taking pride of place on the table was their signature cake, the Meroogal sponge, made fresh on the day by sisters Tottie and Kate.

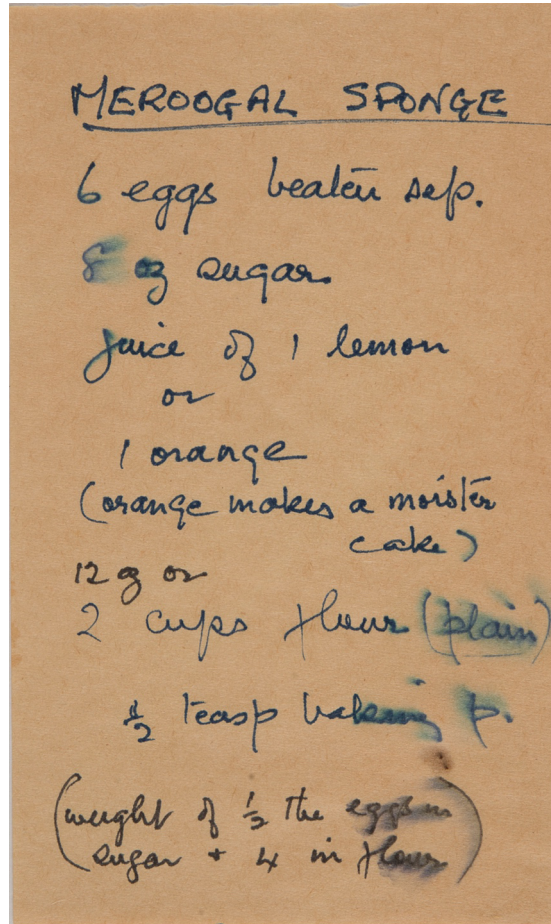


Figure 2. 'Meroogal sponge' recipe, date unknown. Meroogal Collection, Museums of History NSW; © State of New South Wales through Museums of History NSW.

The manuscript recipe for the Meroogal sponge ([Figure 2](#)) does not give a making method, but another in the collection offers more detail ([Figure 3](#)). The Thorburn sisters' great niece and last of the family to own the house, June Wallace, recalls visiting Meroogal when the sponge cake was being made. Tottie would beat the yolks and sugar together while Kate whipped the whites using the knife and plate method. (In a filmed introduction to the museum Wallace dons an apron to demonstrate the snow-whipping process while sitting in a chair in Meroogal's kitchen (see [Wallace 2003](#)). Necessary to produce a light and delicately coloured

1 Annabella Jane (Belle) 1852–1930; Georgia Isabella (Georgie) 1854–1927; Jessie Catherine (Kate) 1857–1945; Kennina Fanny McKenzie (Tottie) 1865–1956; and their mother Jessie Catherine 1824–1916.

sponge of even consistency, these tasks took the aunts a minimum of twenty minutes, and up to half an hour. For many cooks today, they are set-and-forget functions of an electric benchtop mixer.

The group of museum visitors introduced at the beginning of this paper have been tasked with beating one egg-white each to replicate this all-but-forgotten technique, under my direction as convenor of a gastronomy program. Typically, it takes about 5-10 minutes of steady beating to achieve the snow consistency; I invite you to try it yourself.

Memory in Motion

In what has been termed the 'new world paradigm,' museum visitors are no longer satisfied with being passive onlookers. That is, they are not there for oohing and aahhing over fetishised objects, viewing displays from behind glass or ropes, reading didactic interpretation labels, or being told about what they are seeing by tour guides. Rather than defer to the museum as the voice of authority, today's audiences seek cultural, personal and social exchanges that allow more meaningful and ideally, dynamic engagement with places, objects and stories ([Hise 2012](#)).

To attract and retain audiences, therefore, museums (and other cultural institutions) have had to recentre their focus on the visitor, to entice and satisfy audiences with an 'offer' and be conscious of the 'visitor experience.' The experiential exercise of beating egg-whites into snow using the knife and plate method in the museum is a form of 'site activation', bringing the static space (in this case, a 19th-century kitchen) to life by echoing an activity that would once have occurred here. In museum parlance, it is also a form of 'visitor engagement,' and more importantly for this article, memory making.

This immersive re-enactment activity offers an opportunity for sticky memories rather than glancing ones, by giving it meaning in past and present contexts, connecting visitors with real (as in present) and imagined (historical) people, to places including the museum, and with this example, cake.

Before embarking on the activity, the group is advised that the snow-making exercise is experimental and experiential, rather than competitive or a measure of skill. Furtive glances are readily exchanged when presented with an egg that they will need to separate, allowing the white to fall on their respective plate, and the yolk (which will be used for other purposes) turned into a bowl in the centre of the table. The mood enlivens with the whisking underway, initial caution and scepticism soon giving way to more animated responses. Some people focus intently on their work but almost invariably, the group members measure their progress by checking others, laughing or exclaiming their frustration at their perceived level of ability, or expressing annoyance from the futility of their efforts. As convenor, I step in to offer encouragement or tips on technique for those whose whites take longer to become fluffy. People take different operational approaches, some rising from their seats to maintain the required momentum or to put more weight behind their attack, others swap their knife between hands at intervals to relieve fatigue or onerousness from repetitive motion. Some offer to take over for someone making slow progress, either to give them a rest or speed up the process. These physical and emotional responses and interactions introduce a new dynamic to the visitors' relationship with each other, with the museum and with the historical narrative in play, intensifying their meanings.

Sites of Memory

House museums have long been known as sites of memory. Many of them memorialise former residents and/or a particular time in the house's history. Generally, they are interpreted and presented accordingly, furnished and decorated to reflect what the house would once have been like. The collection of personal belongings kept and used by several generations of one family suggests that even before becoming a museum Meroogal was a site of memory for its residents and family descendants. The sponge recipe ([Figure 3](#)), one

of several written out for June Wallace by her mother's sister, Helen Macgregor who lived at Meroogal from 1930–1969, is itself a site of memory. Most of the recipes are attributed to women in the family and their friends. They include personal notes such as 'Castor sugar as needed [for Aunt Kate's shortbread] run through mangle between strong paper of cloth' (Macgregor n.d.: 65) or 'No one ever suspects the dripping' in Nurse Porteous' boiled fruit cake, which is made 'without eggs or butter [...] Rich tasting' (n.d.: 67). Macgregor lamented that there were no recipes from her own mother, Wallace's grandmother, another Thorburn sister—'she was very particular with her cooking but did not have any written recipes' (n.d.). The handwriting suggests Macgregor was aging, or perhaps unwell given a note in the book saying: 'I was often a bit sleepy, with disastrous result to writing' (n.d.), but clearly she wanted to record the recipes, securing their legacy for at least one more generation.

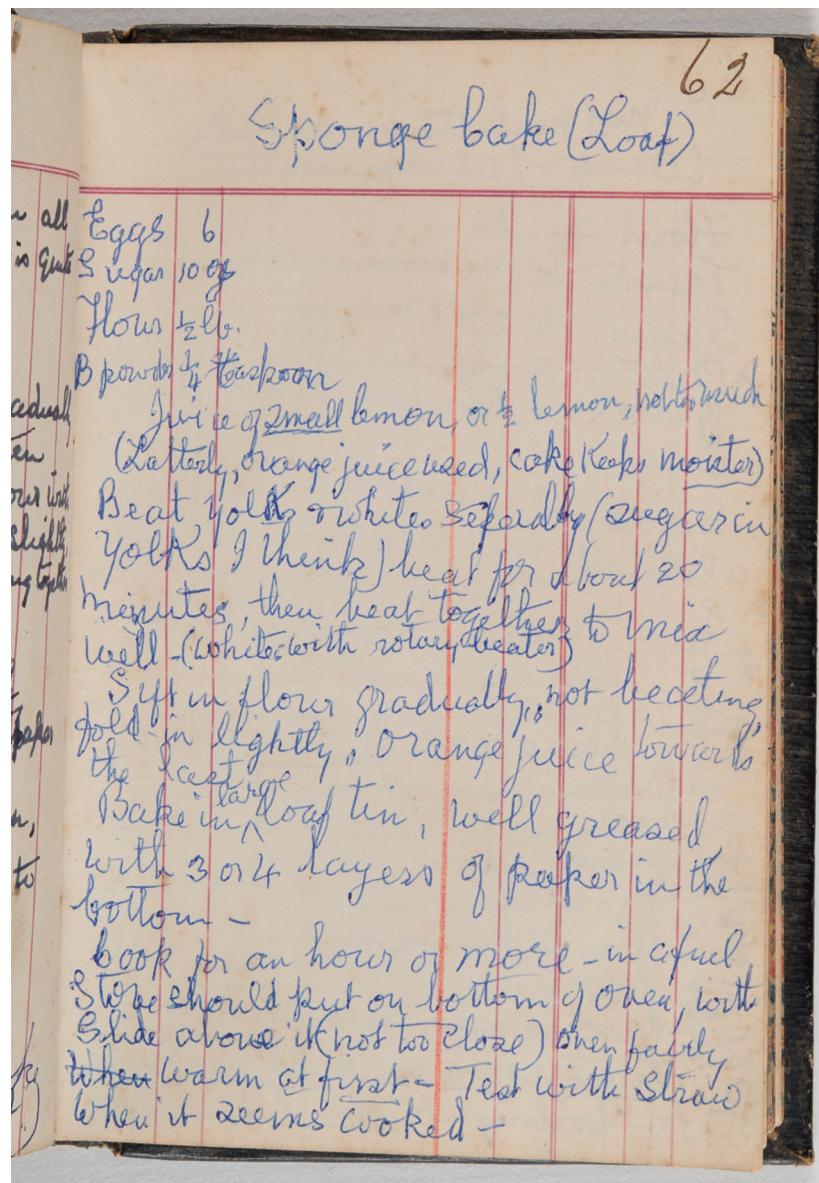


Figure 3. 'Sponge Cake (Loaf)' recipe used at Meroogal, recorded by Helen Macgregor, date unknown. Meroogal Collection, Museums of History NSW; © State of New South Wales through Museums of History NSW.

This later version of the recipe (written in biro rather than liquid ink) says to use a rotary beater for the egg-whites (see [Figure 3](#)). A 1940s beater remains in the house, yet Wallace's memory of her great aunts' technique was perhaps 'stickier,' and certainly more traditional; the intention was not simply to make the sponge, but make it in the way she remembers her great aunts had done.

Returning to the group in the museum, a greater sense of promise is realised as the egg-whites stiffen and increase in volume. As people achieve the desired consistency their moods variably shift from effort and endurance to senses of accomplishment and satisfaction, even relief. Some appear expectant (perhaps non-plussed?)—'what now?'—but while waiting for others to finish, others test their results by tipping the plate—some almost vertically—to see if the mass holds. Others scrape the sides and pile the foam to see how high it will go before tipping. The mood has transitioned from purposeful to playful, with expressions of wonder (waahhHH?!) and delight (grinning and laughter), heightened by boldness and risk-taking.

Making Connections

As [Figure 3](#) indicates, the Meroogal sponge was made in loaf form. The baking tin remains in the museum collection, as do the family's tea services (one for 'best' and others for less formal occasions). Along with the handwritten recipes for the sponge these objects provide tangible connection with the women and their life at Meroogal. The sponge, so long ago made and eaten, the efforts put into making it and pleasure taken from serving and sharing it with friends on countless occasions are now recognised as intangible heritage; they can only be imagined. Being in the house surrounded by the family's belongings helps conjure a convivial setting in the visitors' minds, but even if we don't make or sample the sponge re-enacting the provenanced egg-whipping technique provides a tangible yet imagined connection to the women and their lives in the home. These sensory and emotional connections also act as tributes to the original actors' attachment to this particular cake and the preservation of their memory.

Meroogal may serve as a reminder of 'slower rhythms of the past' and of 'social cohesion and tradition' but rather than the snow-making being a nostalgic 'ritual of commemoration' with opportunity for 'sensual delight in the texture of [a past] time' ([Boym 2007](#)) the exercise is crafted as a conduit for critical thinking about contemporary issues around sustainability and social values in our modern food culture. The story of the sponge and the activity do not need to be tied to or bring reverence to Meroogal only; they extend beyond the walls as a form of reflective rather than restorative nostalgia (following Boym) that 'opens up multiple planes of consciousness' (2007).

A ready-made sponge cake can be purchased at supermarkets for as little as \$6.00. Embellished with one's choice of filling and topping a bought cake can be presented as one's own personalised contribution to a shared occasion. The Meroogal sponge was served without the addition of icing or filling. Its quality and integrity were in the making of the cake, which included small details such as orange rather than lemon juice for a moister cake, the richness of eggs from home-raised hens, the thorough beating of their yolks and sugar, and stiffness of their whites. The comparative example can also be used to stimulate thought about the effects of modern technology on our relationship with food and how we value certain foods. Would an undressed plain sponge be 'enough' of a contribution to a social occasion today? Would it have the social value of a fancier product? Will the dressing up of the cake instil the same level of pleasure and pride as one made from 'scratch'? Almost certainly, the focus on the embellishments helps us overlook the complex list of industrial ingredients on the nutrition label. These considerations open up thought and dialogue about food in contemporary and perhaps future contexts, and the ways that value is ascribed and changes over time.

Heritage Value

Emotional connection, experiential engagement, memory and meaning-making have been buzz-words and catch-phrases in museology for some time, but the term ‘stickiness’ is now entering the frame as an ambition for audience engagement and pedagogical outcomes (see for example [Muclahy 2016](#)). As a recognised craft of conveying information in meaningful and memorable ways, heritage interpretation has been around since the 1950s. Good interpretation practice allows people to receive information in the form of *revelation*; emotion is involved, it needs to be felt (my emphasis) ([Tilden 1957](#): 18). I can (and often do) explain the process of making egg-whites into snow in the telling of the sponge story and its relevance in social values today, but the affective sense of discovery, the ‘a-ha’ realisation felt through first-hand experience—you will know if you’ve tried it—is more emotive, and much stickier than didactic, linguistic methods, being told a story or taught facts.

Engaging visitors through this immersive, performative, sensory activity, also helps create a sense of social and embodied connection to the museum, its history and heritage. Linking the activity to provenanced source material which are in this case, quite diverse in nature – manuscript recipes, oral histories and memoir, and where appropriate, images and personal stories of the people who recorded and cooked them— makes it even more authentic and meaningful. The ‘reverence’ of a historic space or museum setting amplifies the sense of privilege and specialness which, in turn, strengthens the memory of place. The activity is not usually forewarned beyond the promise of an ‘interactive program’ or a ‘hands-on workshop,’ bringing a sense of surprise; an unexpected outcome of signing up for the program. And as a shared experience it has the capacity to develop social memory through emotional bonding and connection with others.

Feeding the Imagination

The relationality of these various historical fragments and immediate experience whipping egg-whites enables greater stickiness, creating in Ahmed’s terms, ‘withness,’ binding bodies with objects and more abstract signs or concepts, values and ideas ([Ahmed 2004](#): 90-91; [Mulcahy 2016](#): 220-221). While the exercise provides opportunity for ‘meditation on history and the passage of time,’ relating it to contemporary food culture offers a ‘new understanding of time and space [...] determined on the needs of the present’ with a view to the future ([Boym 2007](#)). By shifting the emphasis from a restorative exercise in recovering a forgotten culinary practice to a medium for reflective and even prospective discourse, the snow-making activity opens opportunities for discussions about taste, trends and food choice, and more global concerns of industrialisation and its effects on consumers’ connection to their food sources.

The relational assemblage of material and conceptual components ‘solidifies the resonance’ of the stories and messaging ([Ardoin & McWilliam 2016](#): 2), whether they be of two sisters making cake, or the ways that foods change in value over time. The performative re-enactment exercise continues family memories passed down through generations for a hundred years while creating new memories from a sensory, embodied and shared social activity, tied to the museum. It revives a lost art and visitors acquire new knowledge (or newly acquire old knowledge) and a practical skill with first-hand, real-time, multi-sensory connection to an everyday foodstuff.

Made stickier through the affective transfer of sensory and emotional connection through resonant fragments of the family’s (hi)stories the experience carries beyond the interactive moment and the confines of the museum. Once you’ve whipped egg-whites this way in this context, with this knowledge, will you now look at a commercially-made sponge cake without thinking about how they were once made? Through sticky emotions, the simple sponge cake is imbued with additional meaning, taking it beyond nostalgia to the complexities of contemporary food culture, adding meaning, currency and social value to the museum, and in heritage more broadly.

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