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POTATO

Rebecca Earle



Figure 1. M. Frostner and R. Schweiker, Potatoes Are Immigrants, 2016 (courtesy of Keep It Complex and M. Frostner).

In 2016, shortly after the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union, posters started to appear in British cities announcing that 'Potatoes Are Immigrants'. A drawing of a cheerful heap of chips, together with one of those little takeaway forks, accompanied the text. Versions of the image were spotted in the United States shortly afterwards. The poster, by Mia Frostner and Rosalie Schweiker, reminds us that this most 'British' of foods is itself, originally, from somewhere very far away. As in almost every other place where it is eaten today, the Andean origins of the potato have been forgotten. The story of the potato's travels from the American Cordillera to everywhere is a tale at once of colonisation, conflict and local innovation, condensed into a small, earthy mouthful.

When he was growing up in 1970s India, the artist Subodh Gupta wondered whether everyone ate potatoes or if it was only people in Bihar. A French traveller visiting Colombia in the early 19th century was surprised to see 'European' potatoes sold alongside local vegetables such as cassava. For an Indian boy, potatoes are Indian. For a Frenchman, they are European. Today, many people in the United Kingdom and United States believe that potatoes were brought to the British Isles by Sir Walter Raleigh, who supposedly transported them from Virginia. This notion has been circulating for centuries. 'Potatoes of Virginia' is how the tuber is labelled in one of the earliest English illustrations, which appeared in the

botanist John Gerard's 1597 *Herball*.¹ 'This excellent root . . . was first brought into Europe from America, by Sir Walter Raleigh', a horticultural handbook from the late 18th century reported matter-of-factly.² Raleigh, the adventurous Elizabethan courtier and explorer, is credited with introducing any number of American foodstuffs to Europe alongside potatoes; the US comedian Bob Newhart riffed on this theme to brilliant effect in a 1962 monologue, in which he imagines Raleigh trying to convince a sceptical West India Company official of the commercial potential of turkeys, tobacco and coffee.

In fact, potatoes originate from the spine of mountains that runs from the Andes in Bolivia and Chile northwards through the Rockies. These mountains are the homeland of all potatoes. No one outside of these lands had seen a potato before Spanish conquistadors arrived in South America in the 1530s. The encounter of the Old and New Worlds set in motion a global whirlwind that blew potatoes to India, France and beyond.

In Peru the potato had long been a staple, eaten alongside maize, quinoa and a multitude of other vegetables. Freeze-dried, it could be converted into a powder that lasts for years, and it was enjoyed fresh in soups and stews. Unlike maize, which held a high status in the Inca state, potatoes were considered a lowly food, necessary but banal. The Inca ruler himself participated every year in a symbolic maize-planting ceremony, to the accompaniment of music and song, and similar state-level festivities marked the maize harvest. In the sacred fields around the Inca capital, Cusco, small gold replica cornstalks were interspersed amongst the growing maize, to 'encourage' it. No such imperial oversight was bestowed on potatoes. Cultivated at village level, they were traded and consumed within more local orbits, their growth fostered by smaller rituals. One account from 16th-century Peru describes the festivities that marked the inauguration of the planting season in the mountain village of Lampa. Local dignitaries seated themselves on carpets to watch the proceedings. A

procession of richly attired attendants accompanied the seed potatoes, which were carried by six men making music on drums. Events culminated with the sacrifice of a particularly beautiful llama, whose blood was immediately sprinkled on the potatoes. Comparable practices (not necessarily involving llama blood) persist to the present day. Spanish priests objected strongly to these ceremonies but were often powerless to prevent them.

All potatoes nonetheless benefitted from the attention of the Potato Mother, Axomamma, daughter of the Andean earth goddess Pachamama. Together with her sisters and their all-powerful mother, Axomamma controlled the earth's fertility, overseeing the growth of potatoes and other things necessary for sustenance. The veneration of this divine feminine dynasty long predated the official rituals of the Inca empire and reflected the centrality of potatoes to the diet of ordinary people in the Andes. Household shrines to Pachamama and her fertile daughters balanced state-level neglect of the tuber.

Imperial ambitions and desire for wealth brought Francisco Pizarro and his soldiers to Peru in the 16th century. These same forces propelled the potato around the world. The ships carrying crown agents and merchants also transported potatoes to new destinations, which were themselves often undergoing drastic modification as a result of imperial expansion and overseas trade. In New Zealand, where European sailors had planted potatoes in the 1770s, the tubers were quickly adopted into Māori agriculture both as a foodstuff and as a commodity. As a food they supplemented the local staple of sweet potatoes. Unlike sweet potatoes, which were embedded in a pre-existing web of ritual restrictions governing cultivation, the newly arrived potatoes were free of such prohibitions. They proved a popular addition to village agriculture and quickly became an important foodstuff, consumed in huge quantities at the *hui* or festive gatherings that punctuated Māori life. Figure 2 shows a Māori man named Watikini eating a potato. The Scottish naval officer who sketched his portrait noted that he cleaned the plate. Potatoes also acquired an economic importance within Māori society. Together with pigs, they were used as a currency when trading with Europeans for muskets and other iron goods. By the early 19th century, Māori farmers were growing the plant on a commercial

¹ J. Gerard, *Herball, or General History of Plantes* (London, 1597).

² J. Adam, 'Of the culture of esculent roots: of potatoes', *Practical Essays on Agriculture* (London, 1789), vol. 2, 1.



Figure 2. J.C. Crawford, Watikini Eating Potato, pencil and ink drawing, 1861 (courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, E-041-046).

scale specifically for this purpose. European voyages of exploration and colonisation brought the potato to New Zealand, but its entry into Māori life was the result of Māori initiative.

Today, potatoes are grown in virtually every country and are the fourth most important food crop globally. The skilled task of adapting the potato to the varied growing conditions it encountered in New Zealand, northern China, Lancashire and elsewhere was undertaken largely by the anonymous small farmers who raised the new arrival in garden plots and doubtless appreciated its prolific yield and nutritious content. While a hectare of land sown with wheat may yield enough protein to feed seven people over the course of a year, a hectare of potatoes will nourish 17. Only soybeans produce more protein per hectare, among the major crops. Potatoes also require less

water than other staples and grow in a great variety of climatic and soil conditions. Although smallholders and peasants seem to have recognised the potato's attractions quite quickly, it took some time for scientists and government agencies to embrace it. In 17th-century Ireland, colonial representatives of the English state complained that locals spent too much time growing potatoes, smoking tobacco and lazing about. Contemplating regional diets from 1740s Sweden, the great botanist Carolus Linnaeus wondered why on earth servants 'find it so necessary to go on eating potatoes'.³ International organisations concerned with world hunger have now caught up

³ C. Linnaeus, *Skånska resa år 1749* (Stockholm, 1751), 7 June 1749; L. Koerner, *Linnaeus: Nature and Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 148–9.

with Swedish servants and Irish peasants; 2008 was declared the United Nations' International Year of the Potato, in recognition of its contribution to the fight against food insecurity.

We can thank Andean farmers for the global potato. Andean farmers domesticated wild potatoes some ten thousand years ago, and they continue to husband the potato's genetic diversity today. Since the 19th century the number of varieties used in commercial cultivation has shrunk tremendously, and many people worry that this concentration on a small number of cultivars magnifies the risk posed by pathogens such as *Phytophthora infestans*, or late blight, the microorganism that devastated potato fields, and Ireland, in the 1840s. The best way to ensure against a repeat of Black '45 and the terrible Irish Famine is to diversify. Doing this requires the know-how and expertise of Andean farmers. Most Andean potato farmers maintain between 12 and 15 different plots in continuous cultivation. They swap both seeds and fields with neighbours. Through such exchanges a single farmer can gain access to a hundred different potato cultivars. Matching particular seed potatoes to the soil and environmental requirements of specific pieces of land requires a vast body of practical agronomic knowledge, and this sort of constant evaluation and innovation is responsible for the remarkable number of potato varieties in the Andes today: current estimates put the figure somewhere between 2,700 and 3,800. Perhaps we will all be eating more from the Andean potato cornucopia in the future.

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