Conclusion

The Bill of Fare-Thee-Well

La destinée des nations dépend de la manière dont elles se nourrissent.

—Brillat-Savarin, Physiologie du gout, 1854

As though the worn-out weary world that Braddon describes in The Doctor’s Wife were too exhausted, too vitiated—and too void of women—to continue the promulgation of national identity, by the twentieth century, British imperial identity begins to lose both its centered voice and its teleological narrative. In Exiles and Emigres, Terry Eagleton points out that just as the form and the content of the great novels of modernism begin to deny the authority of the omniscient narrator, so too the majority of the canonical novelists are no longer middle-class English authors writing from a fixed position of assurance and stability. Where once Dickens, Eliot, and Hardy told the stories of the nation, of the major modernist writers, only two, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence, are English (and even they represent the upper and the working class); the rest, such as Conrad and Joyce, are exiles or expatriates, writing the British novel from the Other’s point of view. But if the future of British nationalism were destined to be re-imagined as less empirically linear, less confidently purposeful, less avowedly insular, what of the future of nationalism itself? Is Eric Hobsbawm correct in his contention that the owl of Minerva is flying at dusk, “a good sign that it is now circling round nations and nationalism”? Not if the Bald Eagle has his way and clips her wings. Is Tom Nairn correct when he imagines the future as “an imagined proliferation of fantastically different urban-based cultures”? Not if radical Muslims have their way. The owl of Minerva
is hooting with laughter, for nationalism has never seemed so dangerously contentious, so incendiary, so bloody and violent.

Food is such a potent signifier of national identity that it not only creates new enemies, but also articulates old rivalries. On July 5, 2005, London and Paris were both frontrunners as host cities for the 2012 Olympic summer games, although Paris was considered the favorite. On the eve of the announcement, at the Group of Eight summit at Gleneagles, Scotland, Jacques Chirac was heard to grouse, “The only thing [the British] have ever given European farming is mad cow.” Then he added, “You can’t trust people who cook as badly as that.”

Unfortunately for Chirac, he also insulted Finland, claiming it had the worst food in the world. Considering two members of the IOC committee were Finnish, Chirac’s injudicious comments might have been enough to sway voters toward London. Significantly, Chirac made his remarks to Russian President Vladimir Putin who, appropriately, voiced his vote for the world’s worst food: the American hamburger.

Old enemies die hard, and food and nationalism have never seemed so relevant. The owl of Minerva is being roasted on a spit.

According to Linda Colley, one of the most potent ways that Britons defined their national identity was “against the French as they imagined them to be, superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree.” Tellingly, she also uses a food-based metaphor to describe their contentious relationship during the 130-year-long period of Anglo-Franco wars. “[T]he British and the French had their teeth so sunk into each other in these years (and long after) they could neither live together peacefully, nor ignore each other and live neutrally apart” (2–3). Though Chirac’s comments have only added fuel to nationalistic flames, there is at least one area in which the British could benefit from sinking their teeth into the French, and that is in the field of food scholarship.

Beatrice Fink leads the field with her analyses of the alimentary. In “Du savoureux au sublime: vers une poétique de la nourriture,” Fink, following Roland Barthes and Claude Levi-Strauss, sketches a poetics of food in the arena of culinary semiotics. Although Fink is concerned with the emergence of gastronomical discourses, she points out that food is a superlative poetic object for it affects all of our senses—and usually simultaneously. “La nourriture semble d’ailleurs destinée à son rôle d’objet poétique vu sa capacité de stimuler chacune de nos perceptions sensorielles. Tiré du grec aisthanesthai, qui signifie sentir, l’esthétique se confondent ainsi, dans la nourriture, tant au niveau du tangible qu’à celui du sémantique” (208). What is significant here is