

“Notes from Underground - Spring 1999, by David Rose

Old Ironguts - Captain Charles McIlvaine

This column originally appeared in the Spring 1999 issue of Spores Illustrated, the newsletter of the Connecticut-Westchester Mycological Association (COMA).

At COMA'S November meeting, many of us were "hoppin' mad" at the nonchalance of a New York Times Magazine food columnist who suggested mushrooms add "an element of danger and a dash of decadence" to a meal. Our objection was obvious: hyping the danger element can lead the unwary to succumb to the last dinner she or he will ever eat. Period. On the other hand, the culinary allure of mushrooms and the foolhardy pretense of tempting fate demand to be studied carefully. 'Danger and decadence' interpretations of fungi have a long history. They stand somewhere between mycophilia and mycophobia not because fungi delight the palate but because they engage the imagination. Mushrooms tease us with uncertainties but hold fast to their many mysteries by remaining hidden. In fact, the term 'cryptogamia' finds its meaning here. 'Crypto' means 'hidden.' As one author remarked, "The greatest treasures and most wonderful things lie hidden underground - and not without reason."

Consider Charles McIlvaine, author of the classic One Thousand American Fungi. An amateur, McIlvaine was a great popularizer of mycology and tireless promoter of mycophagy. In the latter capacity he achieved a renown not to be matched easily, for his extraordinary appetite for wild mushrooms included several poisonous species, e.g. *Russula emetica* and *Hypholoma fasciculare*. Incredible as it seems, he ate *Hypholomas* indiscriminately, insisting "wherever and however they grow, *Hypholomas* are safe." During his lifetime (by the way, he did not die of mushroom poisoning) McIlvaine consumed prodigious quantities of fungi, edible and otherwise, lavished praise on their dietary advantages, and convinced others to enjoy them as he did. He once claimed to have eaten 437 species - some say his life total was over 800 - in either case a record certainly worthy of a Mushroom Book of Records. Does it surprise us that the good Cap'n McIlvaine is endeared to some as 'Ole Ironguts,' the greatest 'toadstool tester' of his time?

Born in 1840, McIlvaine first worked with local Pennsylvania railroads. When the Civil War began, he led Company H of the 97th Pennsylvania Volunteers as Captain. After the war he had yet to discover a career and in 1873 embarked on his 'grand tour' of Europe, dispatching letters on art criticism home to U. S. newspapers. Returning home he visited the 'mountain state' of West Virginia in 1880, again employed by a railroad company. In the decades after the Civil War spectacular forest fires devastated huge areas of the state's mountainsides, and he readily noticed fungi fruiting in great numbers on the burned-over hills. As he described one instance, "I saw miles of the blackened district made white by a growth of

berkeleyi fully four feet high and from two to three feet broad was exhibited in the window of Doyle the florist." He visualized the anthropomorphic in Polyporus sulphureus - "a giant yellow tongue." His Amanitas were zoomorphic, "smelling faintly of polecat." A mycophagist above all, McIlvaine continually overstated their salutary properties: "The writer saved the life of a lovely woman by feeding her upon Marasmius oreades." By some sudden charm, mushrooms acquired magic: "Cantharellus cibarius. . . might even restore the dead." Finally, don't overlook the sprightly red devil bored with his toxicology text under the shade of dire Amanitas in Plate VI of One Thousand American Fungi. This imp means business.

So beware of those who exaggerate, those who recklessly recommend "danger and a dash of decadence" essential to haute cuisine, and those who conquer fungi, like Cap'n Ironguts' McIlvaine, with mycotoxic abandon and needless heroism: "Hypholoma fasciculare is good eating, is innocent. I have not seen Hypholoma lachrymabundum. When I do I shall eat it and expect to live." (Reminds me of a fine West Virginia recipe for preparing carp - you season the carp on a two-by-four, roast it through, remove it from the oven, then throw away the carp and eat the two-by-four.) McIlvaine has yet to find his biographer, one who will detail his follies and his accomplishments in the contexts of personal and family difficulties, Victorian natural history, and the popularization of mycology. Amid balderdash and loopy recipes, "To Stew the Tougher Toadstools (Hydnaceae, Polyporaceae)," we may discover a man to whom mushrooms were not so much a chimera of the mind but a resplendent reality. And mighty good eatin', too.

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