



## Book Review

**Catherine Parr Traill's The Female Emigrant's Guide:  
Cooking with a Canadian Classic**

Nathalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas (Editors)

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017: 608 pages

Reviewed by Anita Stewart

What a privilege it is to review *Catherine Parr Traill's The Female Emigrant's Guide: Cooking with a Canadian Classic*. Based on broadly annotated recipes published in 1855, this historical treasure trove of food sourcing and cooking has been reworked for modern readers by editors Nathalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas. These authors have been deeply immersed in Canadian culinary history for most of their careers, dedicated to making their findings both accurate and interesting. With this material, I could imagine them setting out together on a journey of discovery, much like Parr Traill and her family did when they sailed from the relative luxury of their "sylvan" Suffolk homeland in 1832 to become bush farmers in Duoro Township north of the hamlet of Peterborough. Our intrepid editors ended up with a Canadian culinary treatise that every curious home cook or chef should read.

Cooke and Lucas have skillfully organized the book to lure us in, guiding us through the opening sections from a thoughtful biography of Catherine and her family to a commentary on her publishing woes (which do not sound much different than those experienced by authors in modern Canada). Rather than garnering sponsorships to help with photos and testing of recipes, Catherine had to sell subscriptions to help fund her publication. She rarely received royalties, and was swindled by her "agent", Reverend Henry Payne Hope. She was a farm wife, a mother of nine children, and as an author she simply did not have time to fuss with "scoundrels".

Putting Catherine’s life (1802 – 1899) into the context of the time is one of the greatest contributions that these editors make. We become “time travelers”, as they put it, with the book serving as an explorer’s toolkit.

We address this new edition of Traill’s Guide to those curious to do more than just read about history. We speak to those who want to reach out and experience history; to taste, touch, feel and smell a nineteenth century backwoods kitchen; to roll up their sleeves and actively participate in recreating the world of women who settled in the Americas and cooked in the backwoods as Catherine Parr Traill did from 1832 to 1854“ (xviii).

In a chapter entitled “Editors’ Notes”, Lucas and Cooke explain how they studiously poured over the original edition inscribed with Parr Traill’s marginalia to ensure that her voice was not lost. Then comes the *Guide* itself, imbued with counsel on just who should immigrate to Canada: forget it if you are indolent or intemperate. Canada was not for the faint of heart. There are notes on gardening, farming, medicinal advice, and what wild plants to use—information largely gleaned from the First Nations people. Her commentary speaks to the culinary geography and the naively-entitled social landscape of early Canada.

The Peach orchards begin to be cultivated westward of Toronto, where all kinds of fruit grow and flourish... The low bush cranberry is not to be found in your clearings or in the woods: it is peculiar to low sandy marshes, near lakes and river-flats. The Indians are the cranberry gatherers: they will trade them for old clothes, pork or flour.” (p.86)

There are recipes, some which she apparently lifted from other tomes. Survival in this land depended upon both flexibility and creativity—there were no copyright laws.

From apples to yeast, there was something to learn. If you wanted apples for winter—and this was one tree fruit from Europe that really *did* flourish—she coached you to plant “the comforts of an orchard”, and included advice on how to protect the new trees from the constant intrusion of wildlife, and which varieties to plant, from Autumn Strawberry to White Winter Pearmain. To their credit, the editors clarify that the legendary McIntosh, selected in eastern Ontario at Dundela, was not on her extensive list because it came into commercial production later. This is the sort of detail that only seasoned culinary historians bring to the table.

Then came harvesting and preserving, from apple jellies and syrup to cider and dried apple pieces for pies, tarts, and even a fever drink. There is a long series of instructions on candle and soap making; poultry & dairy husbandry; dying wool with wild plants; weaving home spun carpets; and a great piece on fire prevention—a constant threat in wood-stove-heated cabins. She spends a good deal of time writing on gardening, in particular about Indian corn which grew well and helped her produce everything from

hominy to pancakes. If you wanted to know how to make real bread using the wheat flour from your farm, you would need to grow and make a leavening agent. This is where the early hops that are now wild around Ontario came from, and Catherine covers yeast production in detail. Hers was a very spiritual life and her *Guide* closes by paying homage not only to her God but to Britain, all the while admonishing her readers to remember their heritage.

From the pages filled with Catherine's food life, Cooke and Lucas spring forth to coach readers on how to use the recipes in our modern kitchens and create menus that speak to current times. Recipes that actually work are a real treat, and the authors have worked hard to ensure results as similar as possible to the original. They have suggested several full menus, depending upon the household economic status that readers wish to emulate. They re-examine Traill's world using numerous other sources, which brings me to the final two gifts that they've given us: a superb bibliography and a spectacularly complete index which Catherine herself failed to provide.

Cooke and Lucas's work on Catherine Parr Trail is a Canadian classic, and accomplishes something that few other authors have done. They allow those of us with roots in this country to remember on whose strong shoulders we are standing, and to heartily celebrate them.

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