

Janis Thiessen, *Snacks: A Canadian Food History*. Winnipeg, MB: [University of Manitoba Press](#), 2017. v + 344pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Paper; ISBN 978-0-88755-799-6, Cdn \$27.95, PDF; ISBN 978-0-88755-529-9, Cdn \$25.00, EPUB; ISBN 978-0-88755-527-5, Cdn \$25.00.

It is often said that cultures are reflected in what people eat, and Janis Thiessen, an historian at the University of Winnipeg, has taken the dictum to heart. Inspired by the small but excellent Canadian contributions to the newly emerging field of historical food studies, *Snacks: A Canadian Food History* aims to fill two gaps. First, to shed light on one particularly neglected aspect of the history of the Canadian food industry and secondly to examine its impact, both in terms of how it shaped Canada's cultural and social evolution.

The book focuses on the business of independent Canadian snack food manufacturing firms through the eyes of their owners, managers, workers and, where possible, their consumers. Thiessen scrutinizes thirteen companies that have manufactured a range of snacks. Four of them (Old Dutch, Federated Fine Food, Hardbite, Covered Bridge) have specialized in potato chips. Hawkins, a Belleville, Ontario-based company, produces "Cheezies" exclusively. Three companies that excelled in chocolate products are examined: Paulins, in Western Canada and Moirs and Ganong, Maritime-based confectioners. A chapter examines candy makers such as Robertson's Candy (Nova Scotia), Scott-Bathgate and Cavalier Candies (from Manitoba), and two from Newfoundland and Labrador: Purity Factories and Browning Harvey. It is worth noting that the author focused her stories on "hardbite" foods, not the addictive cookies and small cakes Canadians consume as snacks all day long. Readers looking for insights on the cultural and industrial impact of the *gâteaux Vachon*, for instance, will not be served. Indeed, Quebec's rich history of candy making is never mentioned. This book is entirely about English Canada.

The study is anchored strongly in the secondary literature and relies on some archival work, making much use of clipping files made available in various locations. Thiessen also conducted over sixty interviews with people associated with the companies in question and she gives these a priority that gives the book a pleasant reportorial style. The basic outlines of each firm's history is sketched out but much of the text is dedicated to the directors and employees of the company. She pays a great deal more attention to the evolution of work (the gradual adoption of technology) than she does to the factors that made these companies, both large and small, successful.

In a bid to gauge the cultural impact of snack food, the book also includes a study of *Kids Bids*, a 1960s television program aimed at children in Western Canada. *Kids Bids* was sponsored by Old Dutch, an effort that clearly was worth the investment as that company consolidated its position as the chip-of-choice for Western consumers.

Thiessen's ambition is broad: she wants to make the case that snacks have been the subject of a class prejudice. Pointing to many studies she considers representative of a consensus, she argues that snacks are perceived as "working class", the object of derision among middle-class critics as

unhealthy, “manufactured” non-food. Instead, she argues, snack foods should be considered a victory for the working class—mostly women earning less-than-average wages and few, if any, benefits—who invested their lives in making these products with pride. She sees no harm in products made almost entirely from sugar or laden with salt. Snack food should be celebrated as more than comestibles, she contends, they are the products of hard-working Canadians and genuine artefacts of culture.

The work succeeds in many ways, and this enthusiastic rehabilitation of chips, Cheezies and chocolate is to be heartily welcomed. But the sugar high provided by the read does not last long, unfortunately. The arguments, in the end, need a great deal more support.

The reliance on oral histories shows the limits of the genre. Most of what is cited from management and labour is not insightful. Certainly, this is not a sector study. Business historians looking for an evolving sense of strategy, for a convincing explanation of why some companies thrived and others failed will regret that none of the firms concerned are examined through financial statements. Perhaps they were not available (surprising, given the amount of archival research), but it is clear that tax records were not consulted. When were the good years? The bad ones? Did these companies do better in hard times or in periods of prosperity? What struggles did they overcome? What was the impact of management successions? Key business questions go unanswered.

The arguments regarding the cultural impact of snacks are difficult to accept when the most culturally significant companies and products are not examined. Thiessen selected firms that were Canadian (with the exception of Old Dutch, which was always American-owned and Hawkins, created and owned by Americans, but operating its Cheezie factory exclusively for Canadian tastes) but does not defend her choices. The reality is that Canada’s addiction to eating snacks between meals was shaped not by the nature of the ownership but by the products themselves, irrespective of the proprietor. There is no discussion of the Walter M. Lowney Company of Canada, the originators and long-time makers of the irresistible “Cherry Blossom”. It was founded in 1883 in Boston but opened factories in Canada in the 1890s and operated in this country for much of the twentieth century. Who can deny the cultural importance of the “Mr. Big” or the “Crispy Crunch” which have been made by Cadbury’s workers in Canada for generations? Nestlé has produced the “Coffee Crisp” “Big Turk” and the “Aero” in Canada for Canadians for a very long time. The Smarties Candy Company, an American firm established in Toronto in 1963, produces enough “Rockets” to feed half of North America. The most obvious gap is Laura Secord, arguably the most successful snack manufacturer in the history of Canada, a firm created in Toronto in 1913 and which today still operates one hundred stores across the country as an iconic Canadian company (it was owned by an American holding company from 1983 to 2010). The same could be said about the impact of various potato snacks. “Maple Leaf” (now owned by Cavendish) or “Miss Vickies” (Pepsico) chips anyone?

Snacks: A Canadian Food History is an enjoyable salty-and-sweet read that is undeniably informative in many respects. Its key virtue is in opening a new field of enquiry that links culture

and snacks. Canada may be part “Old Dutch”, but there is much of it that is part “Smarties”, “Coffee Crisp” and “Laura Secord.” Hopefully, other studies will follow to deepen our understanding of snack manufacturing’s impact on Canada.

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