

## Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW  
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Heick, W. H. *A Propensity to Protect: Butter, Margarine and the Rise of Urban Culture in Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991. Pp. 229

Jim Kenny

Volume 21, Number 1, October 1992

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1019248ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019248ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Kenny, J. (1992). Review of [Heick, W. H. *A Propensity to Protect: Butter, Margarine and the Rise of Urban Culture in Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991. Pp. 229]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 21(1), 62–63. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1019248ar>

Heick, W. H. *A Propensity to Protect: Butter, Margarine and the Rise of Urban Culture in Canada*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1991. Pp. 229.

"Butter, as a food, has served two purposes," argues historian W. H. Heick: "to help provide a better diet and, more importantly, to play a role in the transformation of Canadian society from a rural to an urban dominance ... ." This handsome volume, complete with well-placed cartoons and numerous tables and graphs, explores this transformation by focusing on the butter industry's persistent efforts to have the state ban and regulate the sale of margarine in Canada.

Heick sees butter as symbolic of rural culture, while margarine is viewed as the food of cities, a nutritious and inexpensive substitute for a growing working class. This leads us to Heick's main question: why, then, did Canada, an urbanising country, maintain a virtual legislative ban of margarine between 1886 and 1948, long after other countries had legalised it? He concludes that it was the persistence of rural values—particularly the belief in milk as the perfect food—amongst the new urban population just off the farm that made them vulnerable to the dairy industry's arguments, demonstrated by Heick to be unfounded, that margarine was less nutritious than butter and that it threatened the dairy farmer's livelihood. Only after World War II, when the desire for a higher standard of living led to a better understanding of nutrition and after many Canadians had been exposed to margarine while overseas, was the "Kingdom of the Cow" successfully challenged and margarine made legal. Even so, the author suggests, present-day laws requiring the colourisation of margarine in Ontario and Quebec are testament to the continuing influence of the dairy industry's appeals to Canada's rural roots.

The history of food consumption patterns is a relatively new topic in Canadian history and there are instances in this book where the author demonstrates the value of this type of inquiry. Heick's analysis of the slow emergence of the science of nutrition in the twentieth century is particularly instructive in understanding popular suspicion of margarine. Also, he is careful to make the study national by addressing the progress of the issue in each region.

But there are also weaknesses. The study is uneven in places. For the period between 1886 and 1950 Heick has focused largely on the legislative and judicial "moments" when the margarine issue was debated. He carefully surveys the parliamentary debates, petitions, and newspaper editorials surrounding these moments, but then quickly skips over large time periods in which the issue is not formally addressed. Consequently, while a twelve page chapter discusses in great detail the 1948 Supreme Court reference case that paved the way for the lifting of the ban, the 1924-1945 period—a crucial period in the formation of the Canadian state—is summed up in seven pages. Were the new bureaucratic channels created by the expanding state important to the butter debate? Surely lobbying continued at the formal and informal political levels during this time. The unevenness is also found in the structure of the book itself. Although the majority of the book is organized chronologically, the last three chapters are topical, focusing on the issues of economics, nutrition and marketplace competition in the post-1950 period. This unexplained shift in style upsets the flow of the book.

Perhaps more importantly, Heick has treated the "dairy industry" as a monolithic entity apparently universally opposed to margarine. As the work of J. H. Thompson and Ian MacPherson suggests, social stratification among farmers

based on resources must be considered when examining the positions of farmers' organizations. It would be nice to know a bit more about which farmers were represented by the agricultural groups lobbying against margarine noted by Heick. And what was the role of milk marketing boards in this debate? Likewise it seems important that we understand the extent to which the creameries that produced butter were owned and operated by farmers' co-operatives as opposed to private capitalists. Did individual farmers share in the profits from the high price of butter? My point is that it might be valuable to distinguish between the interests of creameries and milk producers.

In light of Marjorie Griffin Cohen's important work on women and the dairy industry (which this study ignores), the author could also have examined the role of gender in the transformation from a rural to an urban culture. Cohen shows that the transition from household to creamery production of butter in the early twentieth century transformed buttermaking from "women's work" to men's work. This transition was marked by an increasing emphasis on scientific and heavily capitalised production, characteristics of an industrialising and urbanising society. This evidence suggests that changes in the way food is produced may be as important as the type of food that is consumed. Moreover, it seems significant that in the new urban society in the twentieth century it was women who bought groceries. Perhaps the fact that many of these women helped their mothers make butter made them particularly vulnerable to the "rural myth" of butter described by the author.

Despite these criticisms, Heick has looked at an old topic—the transition to an urban Canadian society—in a new way. In doing so, he has demonstrated yet again the "propensity" of the Canadian state to act at the behest of powerful interest groups. He has also explained

why Ontario margarine looks so darn funny.

Jim Kenny  
History Department  
Carleton University

**Joan Winearls, *Mapping Upper Canada 1780-1867: An Annotated Bibliography of Manuscript and Printed Maps*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991. Pp xli, 986. \$175.00.**

This impressive and expensive volume is one that historians of Ontario, and especially of urban Ontario, will want to have close at hand. It lists and describes some 7,000 maps, both manuscript and printed, dating from the time of "effective British occupation" down to Confederation. The originals are to be found in some 150 repositories. They include 2,900 subdivision plans in the 55 Ontario land registry offices, and the most important maps in the Survey Records Office of the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources. Neither of these important accumulations has been comprehensively listed before in print, even within the limits of Winearls' timeframe.

As Winearls notes in her lucid introduction, many maps in the past have been poorly catalogued and badly described. This volume remedies the latter problem. The author's descriptions of the individual items are extremely full and careful and, used in conjunction with the maps themselves, will open researchers' eyes to the wealth of information that maps can divulge to an observant user. Related maps are listed together as are various states, editions, and versions of the same map. This is very useful, for these maps are frequently found in different places, or are filed in separate categories even in a single repository. The volume is exceptionally well conceived and well organized, though one still needs to supplement the introduction by

reading the same author's chapter, "Sources for Early Maps of Ontario," in Gentilcore and Head's *Ontario's History in Maps* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

Nearly half the maps listed are of cities, towns and villages. More than 700 such urban places are listed, under the names by which they were known before 1974. An appendix listing town and subdivision names by county enables one to locate all town plot maps for a given area, including plans for undeveloped town-sites with unfamiliar names. Many towns and villages that were not brought into being by the platting of an anticipatory subdivision plan but grew up organically around a crossroads or millsite were not the subject of independent maps in this period. Many are portrayed only in insets to the series of county maps by Walling, Tremaine, and others. The village insets in these maps are all noted in the listings for the maps concerned, and they are referenced in the volume's subject index. One must therefore be careful to consult all of the several alphabetical lists in this volume.

Printed maps of cities and towns are, or should be, notorious for selective updating, inclusion of neighbourhoods that existed only on paper, and omission of subdivisions of recent date or beyond corporation limits. The listing of subdivision plans is especially valuable as they, along with registrations of title and assessment rolls (which reveal the extent of actual occupation and construction), are important but much underutilized sources for the study of boom eras such as the early 1850s. In publishing details of cartographic evidence for the speculative ventures of prominent merchants and politicians, as well as of a host of lesser figures, Winearls draws attention to the potential for such research that beckons in archives and in crowded registry offices. Similarly, urban morphology has not become the major analytical tool in

Canada that it has in Britain, and few Canadian urban histories explore in detail the physical as opposed to the economic growth of our cities. One hopes that this book will attract more scholars to the parts that make up the whole.

I do wish that the introduction had given us more information about the history of the Upper Canadian land registry system, for it is essential to recognize that many registered plans from this period were drawn up in response to evolving statutory requirements and are versions of much earlier surveys. The small flood of registered plans in the early 1850s reflects not only the urban aspirations of speculative investors but also the passage of the 1849 Survey Act. This prompted many landowners, such as the Burritts of Burritts Rapids (maps B382-4), to have new plans of much older village sites drawn up and put on file for the first time. The implementation of the abstract system of indexing under the Registry Act of 1866 again prompted the registration of some much earlier plans, and some of these fall outside Winearls' timeframe.

It is relieving to learn that Winearls was neither content merely to consult the frequently inadequate lists of plans at the local registry offices, nor to examine the mylar versions of plans currently in use. She also pored over originals that in some offices are stored in highly inaccessible places. I looked up a number of obscure items from the Ottawa-Carleton office that most employees, familiar only with the mylars, declare to be "missing", and they are all listed here. Since publication of this volume, a number of registry offices have been closed and many of these plans will have been moved to other locations. Nonetheless the listing of the registered subdivision plans is one of the great boons of this volume for the urban historian.