

***The Pioneer Cook : A Historical View of Canadian Prairie Food.***  
**By Beulah M. Barss (Calgary : Detselig, 1980. Pp. 134,**  
**photographs, index)**

Michael Taft

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**The Pioneer Cook: A Historical View of Canadian Prairie Food**

By Beulah M. Barss

(Calgary: Detselig, 1980. Pp. 134, photographs, index)

Fortunately this work is not a cookbook. Rather it is a no-nonsense survey of pre-1914 prairie foodways, and its aim is clearly stated in its introduction:

This book traces the development of food patterns through the fur trade and homestead era prior to 1914. Prairie pioneer methods of securing, storing, preserving and cooking have been recorded, retaining the original methods whenever possible.

As a book of historical documents, descriptions from nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers, questionnaire responses, and interviews, the work fulfills its promise.

In fact, the methodology which Barss employs is perhaps the best feature of her book. Although her model has clearly been other social histories, she has not limited herself to the kind of orthodox historical documents which may sit well with historians but which deaden the study from the folklorist's point of view. Her use of the Saskatchewan Archives Board pioneer questionnaires (conducted in the 1950s), taped interviews from the Provincial Archives of Alberta, apparently her own interviews as well, and material from local histories and ephemeral publications, both broaden and deepen her investigation. In short, she has done her homework.

That this is an historical work rather than a folkloristic one is evident, however, in the way in which Barss uses the material which she has collected. Although there is a running commentary on prairie foodways, the text is interrupted on almost every page by bordered insertions which are usually interview or questionnaire quotations, definitions of terms, or first-hand written accounts (as well as the odd recipe).

Indeed the book reads like a small archive of foodways documents, arranged in only rough order for casual browsing. This style may well have been intended, but in choosing this method of presentation Barss has sacrificed a tight, well-integrated work which the subject deserves. My criticism here is not a major one; the information is all here on what people ate, how they prepared and preserved their food, why food patterns changed over the years, and how food technology evolved. But a more integrated approach to the material would have made better reading (the prose style is a bit dry) — even hard to digest in places) and might have led to more syntheses in the mind of the reader.

As a survey of prairie foodways, the book answers most of the questions which the casual reader might raise. It has chapters on the separate food traditions of the early fur traders and the later homesteaders (the book purposefully excludes Indian foodways as a study in itself, but discusses the influence of Indian culture on European food traditions); it has chapters on the specific technological questions of preservation, storage, provisioning, and preparation; a chapter on bread and another on ovens; and a final miscellaneous chapter which if the only cookbook-like section in the book. Barss does have some trouble organizing these sections, often repeating information from one chapter to the next, but again this is a small flaw.

The book does not raise certain questions, however, which might especially interest the folklorist; namely, the more social and aesthetic aspects of foodways. Thus, there is little on eating as a social occasion: ritual feasts, threshing crew meals, the dynamics of house-visit meals, and the like. Neither is there enough discussion of the prairie person's concepts of taste, appropriateness, or contamination regarding the food which he ate. But these are typical folklorist's criticisms of a book which

was never meant to be a piece of folkloristic scholarship. The folklorist in me also objects to her complete lack of documentation of what seem to be her own interviews; for example, she mentions on several occasions that "Cowboy Bud Cotten recalls," but who interviewed Mr. Cotten, when and where, bare a mystery. This lapse is unfortunate, considering the careful documentation which Barss gives for the rest of her sources. The bibliographer in me objects to the lack of an overall bibliography; one must hunt through the footnotes to find her sources.

In all, it is a good survey or introduction to the subject. If it is perhaps too humourless considering the subject matter, I did wonder about an undocumented insertion (p. 32) which points out that "snow is an excellent substitute for eggs either in puddings or pancakes."

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**The Potters' View of Canada:  
Canadian Scenes on Nineteenth-Century  
Earthenware**

*By Elizabeth Collard*

*(Kingston and Montreal:*

*McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983.*

*Pp. 194, photographs. Cloth.)*

This book concerns 19<sup>th</sup> century earthenware mass-produced by British potters. More specifically, it deals with wares decorated with various scenes of Canada through the use of the transfer printing process. Why study such objects? The author discusses their appeal on the first page of this slim work:

They link the world of the artists and printmakers and, as the nineteenth century advanced, the more "truthful" world of the photographer to the ceramics industry. They reflect taste in its changing moods, not only taste in the wares themselves (their bodies, shapes, colours) but a changing way

of looking at things (from the romantic to the literal). As ceramic wares, these potters' views belong with the familiar objects of everyday use which are part of what has come to be called material history. (p. 3)

Drawing upon an extensive collection of these wares in the National Museum of Man, Collard proceeds to explore these and other topics in order to describe the evolution of the objects within their historical context.

Although it is quite brief, the first chapter is a clear, well-researched description of the production and marketing of printed earthenware — the major ceramic export of 19<sup>th</sup> century Great Britain. Making good use of business papers, newspaper advertisements and other documents, the author vividly illustrates how, in this highly competitive industry, the potters attempted to respond to an eager public's desire for variety in colour, pattern and style. She also uses these data to show the development of the marketing of British earthenware in Canada. With an eye toward capturing the large Canadian market, potters began to decorate their wares with scenes of Canada.

Seven of the remaining eleven chapters focus mainly on the scenes that the potters selected, the historical significance of these scenes, and the sources from which they were derived. These scenes include: the death of Gen. Wolfe, paddle-wheelers, Cunarders, arctic scenery, maple leaves and beavers, and Canadian sports. Two other chapters deal with two prominent pottery firms: Enoch Wood & Sons and Francis Morley & Co. Another pair of chapters pertains to two important sources of Canadian views: the illustrations of William Henry Bartlett, and photography. There is much fascinating information in these chapters relative to the ways that 19<sup>th</sup> century Canada was viewed from afar. A key point made by the author is that "potters who had used the artist's emotional interpretations of Canadian views turned, in the closing