

Dinner With Lady Agnes

Culinary Delights for the Historian at Heart

For the gourmand and history-buff alike, *Macdonald was late for Dinner* is a delectable romp through the culinary arts of nineteenth century Canada.

***Macdonald was late for Dinner: A Slice of Culinary Life in Early Canada*
by Patricia Beeson. Broadview Press, 1993. \$19.95.**

by Margaret Sloan

I love cookbooks. I take them to bed as night time reading, imagining all the lovely menus and exotic concoctions that I might produce. A good cookbook is as fascinating as a good spy story. I love cooking too, and don't mind spending time experimenting with recipes that look interesting and possible. I say "possible" because one of the problems with cookbooks today is that the ingredients have become more and more exotic and difficult to find. If one doesn't have a convenient little corner store that stocks lemon grass or fresh okra out of season, the recipe must be filed away for a more propitious time, and generally is forgotten. Furthermore, I don't like recipes that tell you to mix all the ingredients with a tin of canned tomato soup. If I am going to cook, I want to start at the beginning.

And this is precisely where Patricia Beeson's new cookbook, *Macdonald was late for Dinner*, commences: at Canada's early beginnings. Here is a cookbook that combines recipes with history, mixing the ingredients with the historical occasions when they might have been used. The accompanying photographs bring the individual situations to life. Set in early Eastern Canada, Ms. Beeson has really done her homework in researching suitable historical moments as well as the possible recipes that might have accom-

Margaret Sloan is an avid cook from Vancouver, B.C. who really does read cookbooks in bed at night. Her father taught her to make bannock bread and she learned the rest of her cooking skills by watching her mother.

panied the festivities.

Bringing The Cuisine To Life

The title essay, "Macdonald was late for Dinner" is a touching quote from Lady Agnes Macdonald's diary in which she describes a New Year's reception at her home, Earnscliffe. Her husband, Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A., was called away "to a council" before the first guest arrived. He returned much later, only to be called away again before he had time to eat—much to the Lady's chagrin. The recipe for the dinner's oyster soup is complimented with photographs of the Macdonald house and of Mrs. Macdonald.

Another incident describes a garden party given by Professor and Mrs. Goldwin Smith for the Governor General and Lady Aberdeen. Professor Smith was apparently a strong republican and not happy with vice-regal society in Canada. Nonetheless, he entertained the Governor General's party in the most formal and correct manner possible. As Lady Aberdeen wrote in her diary: "It is a curious fact that [Goldwin

Smith] should also be the man to receive us in the most royal manner, every point of etiquette being formally observed—special gate reserved for our carriage alone to enter, band ready to strike up...red cloth—the Goldwin Smiths themselves on doorsteps and hat in hand...ready to fetch anyone we wanted to speak to. It was all very funny." Two of Mrs Smith's recipes are provided along with photographs of the Smith house dur-



Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald.
[Metro Toronto Reference Library]

ing the garden party and of Mrs. Smith herself.

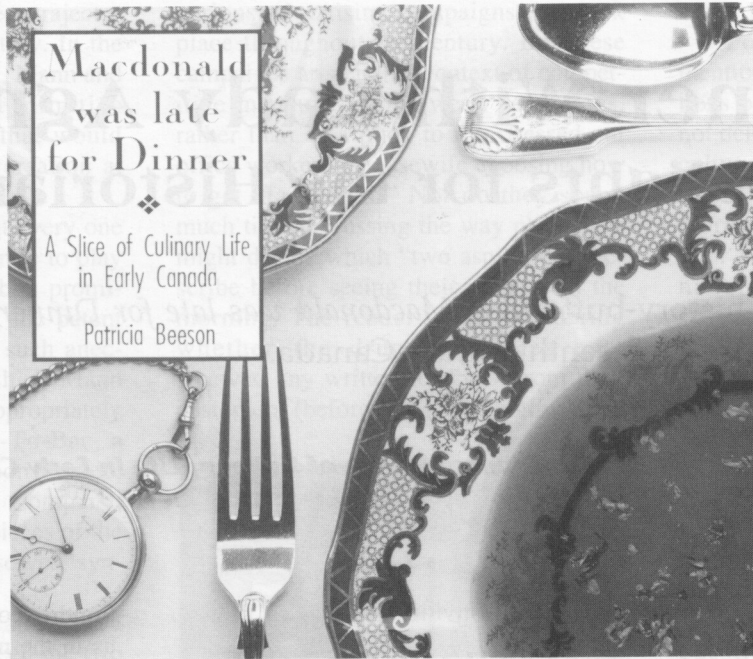
These are only two of the many vignettes of early life in Upper Canada during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which portray early life from vice-regal society in Toronto and Ottawa to the huntsman in the backwoods. Although the majority of the recipes and the accompanying photographs depict the British tradition, the prominent ethnic groups of that time are also included—Serbs, French, Finns, Germans, Swiss, Poles, Greeks, Italians, Central and East European Jews, and aboriginal Ojibways.

There are two photographs of Grey Owl taken during his stay in Temagami and recipes of two of his favorite foods—bannock and boiled trout—which were written down for Ms. Beeson by “Madeleine”, the Indian wife of one of his old friends.

No Quick-Mart For Lady Agnes

On reading the recipes I was constantly reminded that, for the most part, basic food supplies were seasonal and local. There was no supermarket at the end of the block stocking exotic supplies from all over the world, and no refrigerated transports from Florida or California supplying fresh fruit and vegetables out of season or of the type that cannot be grown by local farmers. On the other hand, there was plentiful use of regional wild produce such as cranberries, gooseberries, blueberries, currants, venison and game. Included is an interesting recipe for fruit soup, a compote which can be served either hot in winter or cold in summer because all the fruit in it is dried.

One must also remember that there were very few previously prepared foods to make life easier for the cook. If one made “Vol-au-Vent of Eggs”, a recipe from Earncliffe, one was forced to begin by making the puff



pastry since there were no ready-made puff patty shells from the local bakery. The major exception at this time in Ontario was Mr. Christie, who baked biscuits. This was the famous Mr. Christie of Christie Brown Biscuits who began life as a baker's apprentice in Scotland.

I was struck by the simplicity of most of the recipes—I say most, because there are a few, such as haggis, that will never be simple. However, Beeson does presume that anyone using the recipes is already familiar with the rudiments of cooking and knows how to proceed. For instance, when mixing dough, one would add a bit more flour if necessary, in



Patricia Beeson, author of *Macdonald was late for Dinner*.

order to make a “nice bun dough”. Oven temperatures are of necessity approximate as the stoves in early Canada were fueled either by wood or coal. (All the measures in the cookbook are Imperial).

My one criticism is the difficulty of re-finding a favorite recipe or vignette. The recipes are listed in the index at the back and the vignettes are outlined by title only in the front. As a case in point, Catherine Parr Trail is mentioned on three pages, but if one doesn't remember that she had a recipe for tea cakes, rice pudding or venison, one is hard pressed to find her

name in either of the indexes. However, to simplify the situation, a great deal of cross-referencing would be needed—not necessary in this sort of book. It means that one must simply go over the pages again—by no means a difficult or unrewarding task.

Some Madeira, My Dear

Two items thrilled me personally. Accompanying Mrs. Nordheimer's marvellous Christmas suet pudding is her recipe for a white sauce (with almost as much Madeira as milk and many egg yolks as well). My sister-in-law, who comes from Ottawa, said her grandmother had such a recipe but had never written it down. So next year we will have white sauce with our carrot (not suet) pudding. I have another friend, who also comes from Ottawa, whose family is mentioned in one of the vignettes. There are two birthday presents solved.

I have enjoyed reading this book immensely. The recipes are such that I won't rush to prepare them for my next dinner party, but most are indeed worth trying. As an indication of colonial life in Eastern Canada at that time, however, *Macdonald was late for Dinner* is a mouth-watering feast. ●