

Catharine Parr Traill's The Female Emigrant's Guide: Cooking with a Canadian Classic edited by Nathalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas

Alison Norman

Volume 110, Number 2, Fall 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1053520ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053520ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Norman, A. (2018). Review of [*Catharine Parr Traill's The Female Emigrant's Guide: Cooking with a Canadian Classic* edited by Nathalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas]. *Ontario History*, 110(2), 244–245. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1053520ar>

Catharine Parr Traill's The Female Emigrant's Guide
Cooking with a Canadian Classic

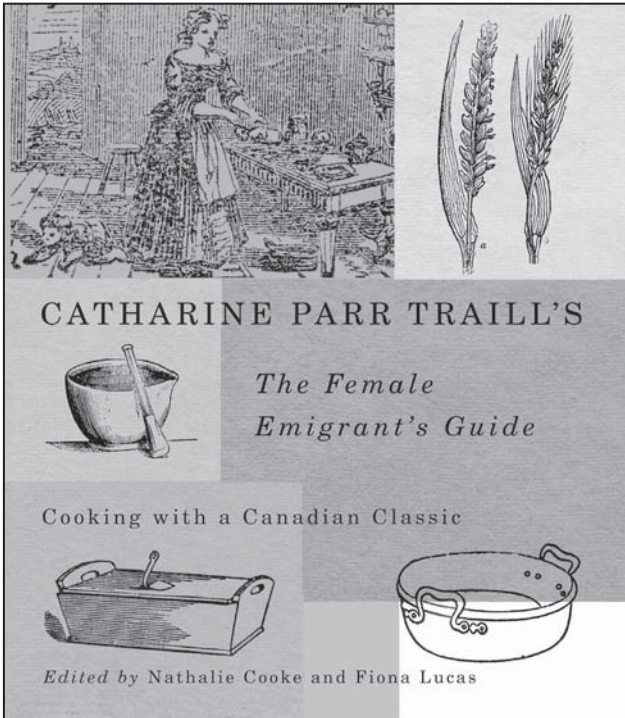
Edited by Nathalie Cooke and Fiona Lucas

Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 608 pages. \$39.95 softcover. ISBN 9780773549302. \$125 hardcover. ISBN 9780773549306 (www.mqup.ca)

For those interested in Upper Canadian history, women's history, the history of immigration and settlement, or culinary history, this book is a treasure. This lovely tome is not only a reprint of Catharine Parr Traill's *The Female Emigrant's Guide* (first published in 1854, and as a complete book in 1855), but is what editors Nathalie Cooke (associate dean of the McGill Library and professor of English at McGill University) and Fiona Lucas (co-founder of the Culinary Historians of Canada) call "an explorer's

toolkit" to the guide. Their goal is to provide guidance in understanding and using the guide, one meant for Upper Canadian settlers in the backwoods, and the editors have certainly achieved their goal with this book.

Scholars of the history of Upper Canada will doubtless be familiar with this well-known settler family, siblings Catharine Parr Traill, her sister Susana Moodie, and their brother Samuel Strickland, who all published books of various descriptions in the mid-nineteenth century. I have always found Traill's book to be the most interesting, and believed that it was likely the most useful for settlers to the region. Cooke and Lucas' volume confirms my suspicions. The volume was printed in 1855, and as Cooke and Lucas say, "the *Guide* was not only a treasure trove of information about how to survive for those embarking on a journey into the backwoods; it also provides a treasure trove of knowledge about scratch cooking and food sourcing for those interested in self-sufficiency and practical housekeeping" (xix). Why might readers in the twenty-first century be interested in knowledge geared towards



emigrants over 150 years ago? Because “it is full of fundamental knowledge about seasonal eating, local sourcing, foraging, small-scale farming, kitchen gardening, and how to preserve the bounty for future generations—a wonderful tool for those interested in reviving long-forgotten and little-used culinary techniques,” and there are certainly many of those today (xix).

This book is different from a monograph or an edited primary source. Almost everything a reader might want is included. After the introduction, the editors have written a short biography of Traill herself, a chapter on the publication history of the *Guide*, and then the *Guide* itself is reprinted (which takes up about 250 of the 608 pages). The next few hundred pages contain some really wonderful context and explanations for Traill’s original book. A guide to Traill’s world, sample menus for at home and special occasions, information on measurements, and a discussion of the interpretation of nineteenth-century recipes are just some of the chapters that follow. What hearth cooks will most appreciate is that Cooke and Lucas have provided updated recipes to “allow readers to actively use the *Guide*—to embark on an exercise of imagination and experimentation with nineteenth-century recipes” (xx). The explanations and annotations from the editors make it so that any home cook today can make these recipes for themselves. The last main section of the book are two glossaries. One examines “Food and Cooking Terms,” and the other covers “Traill’s Sources and Influences.” The “Glossary of Food and Cooking Terms” will help readers learn about the context of mid-nineteenth century cooking, as it explains culi-

nary terms, both equipment and foods that may not be at all familiar to modern readers. This glossary might be the most valuable part of the book for those looking to understand and use historical recipes that often use different terminology and dated measurements. Lastly, the book includes a bibliography and index, both useful additions that aren’t always included.

While the book will be useful to culinary historians and hearth cooks, I think that there is much that can be learned for readers interested in life in Upper Canada, including relations with Indigenous people in the area that Traill’s family settled in. Traill generally respected her Anishnaabe neighbours, particularly for their knowledge of the flora and fauna, and their skills like harvesting wild rice and making maple sugar and syrup, and that is evident in the *Guide* itself. But Cooke and Lucas have provided further information about the impacts of treaties on local First Nations, the loss of land, and the impact of the development of the Trent-Severn water way on the production of wild rice on Rice Lake, for instance, which isn’t clear at all if one were to just read Traill’s *Guide*. The research and context provided throughout this tome make it a valuable book for many reasons, and for different kinds of readers. Traill’s *Guide* deserves the treatment given to it by Cooke and Lucas, and the resulting book is sure to be much appreciated by those with a passion for this period in Canadian history, the Strickland family, and by those who will look for advice on how to use a mid-nineteenth century recipe with successful results.

Alison Norman
Trent University