

Feasting and Fasting: Canada's Heritage Celebrations by Dorothy Duncan

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Book Reviews

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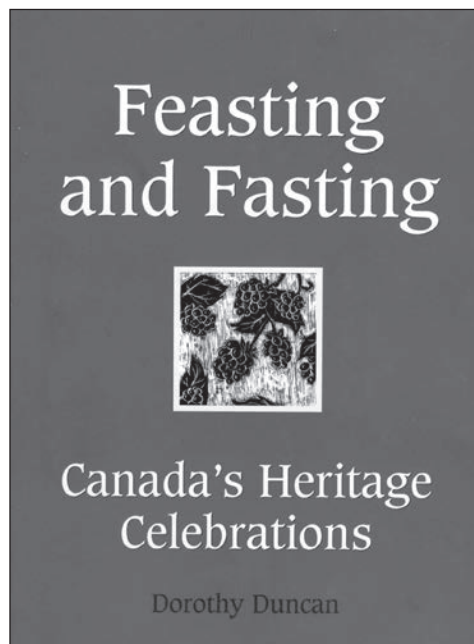
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Feasting and Fasting: Canada's Heritage Celebrations

by Dorothy Duncan

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 256 pages.
\$26.99 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-757-6
(www.dundurn.com)

There are many criticisms made of our present Canadian food culture. One of the more common observations is that it seems to be in decline. Culinary historians watch developing cuisines with some trepidation as the growing cookbook publishing industry shows a lack of socio-cultural roots and dictates to popular palates. Current food industry literature abounds with experts who impart their ideas of kitchen expertise to the reader. Award winning author Dorothy Duncan is one of the few champions of our Canadian food heritage and her recent book, *Feasting and Fasting: Canada's Heritage Celebrations*, demonstrates how she established her reputation as a fine source



for this country's culinary history. Her understanding and respect for food does not pander to the trendy, nor does she simply list a collection of historical recipes.

At 84, she sees our epicurean mindfulness returning in an increasing regard for

the value of a local food supply. It is in this vein that she conveys the relevance of the past to our daily lives. Just as newcomers to Canada were greeted by the hospitality of First Nations, so too did each new cultural group grow accustomed to this land, establishing itself within the context of building communities through faith, work and celebrations. Despite dissimilar backgrounds our culinary memories and traditions often adopted local ingredients and customs. In *Feasting and Fasting*, Duncan highlights this unique sociological history.

This book is no tome. There's nothing huge nor overwhelming about it. The petite bundle is a significant compilation of what was on our tables during meaningful events in our collective history. What it lacks in size it makes up for in depth. Beginning with a solid nod to First Nations' generosity of spirit in reaching out to new settlers, Duncan provides a tasty sampling of the diverse fare found in the developing colony of Canada. Spread against the backdrop of immigrants facing difficult climates and terrains, Duncan deftly highlights various religious and folk practices brought from homelands, as well as their approach to adaptations.

Thirty-four brief chapters gradually unfold details of our rituals from New Year to New Year, from our ancient ancestors to the 1950s. It is simple in design and easy to follow. However, as I read I wondered why she chose this structure. There are so many ways to reveal the common elements of our customs or beliefs. With such strong connections between religious holidays stemming from the earth's cycles, the year could be broken into seasons. For example, in Chapter 2 Duncan identifies the traditions of New Year feasts of the Quebecois with dried apples, the Acadians with Poutine Rapées, and the Greek Manitoban's Basilpeta (in honour of St. Basil). In Chap-

ter 7 she examines the incredible Chinese contributions to Canadian life and their symbolic foods at New Years that symbolize prosperity, such as tangerines representing gold ingots and fish served whole for long life or plenty. In Chapter 23 the Jewish New Year equally uses symbolism in food with apples or bread dipped in honey for a sweet year, and fish (Gelfilte Lake Winnipeg Fish no less) for plenty. In the final chapter we complete the circle with Scottish Hogmanay. Haggis aside, in Cape Breton you'll have ginger wine, Atholl Brose and Rich Biscuits in the hope for prosperity and good fortune. The information spread throughout the book left me longing for these fabulous commonalities to be combined, wrapped up and packaged perhaps in different structure.

Nevertheless, I relished how Champlain's *Order of Good Cheers* served up moose and turtledove pastry and savoured the *Sap's Running* chapter's great background to Native traditions of being thankful for the energy-giving medicine of maple sugar, as well as the sugaring off festivals of the Quebecois with maple on snow.

Clearly this book is far more an exploration of feasting than fasting, but as a culinary historian, I approve. The cultural cross-over is apparent as we read of the Jewish Passover customs, Easter Traditions and Mother Earth celebrations of spring. Early greens symbolized fruits of the earth, eggs as birth and fertility, and almost every group had their favourite braided and spiced egg-bread recipe.

Pleasure parties were had for all sorts of occasions as breakfasts, picnics (especially those of a political nature) and dining in cultured gardens. Duncan leaves no stone unturned as she navigates through the rest of the year. There's excellent description of the fur traders affinity for beaver meat and tails and the feasts of the *Rendezvous*,

blended perfectly with the intriguing partnerships of the English, Scottish, French-Canadians and Metis of the North West Company.

Feasting and Fasting will appeal to historians, cooks and trivia buffs alike. It is well referenced with a strong bibliography. One would expect no less from Ms. Duncan. An entertaining and interesting read indeed. In the end, it felt complete while still urging us to engage in further research on the material found in any one of these chapters. This is a perfect sampler of our

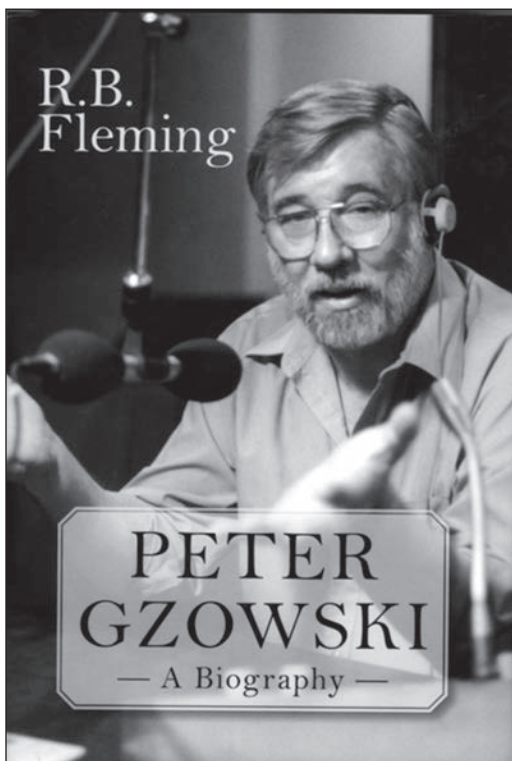
socio-cultural culinary history. As Canadian perspectives on cooking and feasting often exclude any reflection of our food heritage, Duncan encourages us to connect to our not so distant foodways. The potential impact of such a connection on our culinary landscape is immeasurable. It could even inspire us to cook!

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Peter Gzowski: A Biography

By R. B. Fleming

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2010. 512 pp. \$40.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55488-720-0 (www.dundurn.com)



Peter Gzowski was an icon. As host of the CBC radio show *Morningside* from 1982 until 1997, he articulated a view of Canada that resonated across the country. His biographer, R.B. Fleming, talks of Gzowski's ability to imagine this view of Canada into existence. But that was not quite it. Rather Gzowski had an extraordinary ability to clarify the imaginings of his audience, and then reflect them back.

For a newspaper man of his era (and even in radio, Gzowski was a newspaper man), his life was not particularly unusual. He drank and smoked too much. He preferred hanging out with his cronies to life at home with wife and children. He was unfaithful.

The man who would eventually be lauded as one of Canada's premier journalists fell into his profession by accident. In 1954, he was doing badly at university and needed a job. Thanks to family pull, he landed one at the Timmins *Daily*