

*This Land: The Story of Two Hundred Acres in Kent County,  
Ontario* by Kae Elgie

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Women often questioned the capitalist, profit-based economy and advocated for consumption that promoted the interests of families and communities. Belisle's examination of cooperative movements clearly indicates women's active participation in the consumer market, as women organized to promote "new forms of consumer citizenship that prioritized affordability and community support" (150). Similarly, rural women were actively involved in the consumer market in ways that fit their needs. Women participated in the sharing of knowledge and resources among their community, and organizations such as the Women's Institute acted as an "informal consumer agency" to promote enjoyable and affordable rural consumption (103). Rural women, similar to those in cooperative movements, favoured consumer habits that benefited their community and saw consumerism as a political issue.

Belisle's use of archives of the club women's movement, home economics movement, and cooperative movement presents a noticeably white, middle-class perspective, which she acknowledges throughout her study. Belisle recognizes that the opinions of those in leadership positions in organizations such as the Wom-

en's Institute and the WCTU represent privileged, white voices (127). The lack of diverse voices found throughout *Purchasing Power* indicates the relationship between consumption and white, middle-class, Euro-Canadian citizenship. As Belisle explains in her conclusion, "[women's] class and racial privilege encouraged many to use consumer display as a venue by which to judge who—and who did not—meet the criteria for membership in the modern Canadian polity." This poses the question of when, or if, this relationship between privilege and consumerism shifted in Canada to allow more diverse actors to hold power in the consumer market.

Overall, *Purchasing Power* is a fascinating study that combines historiographies of consumer culture, political economy, and Canadian identity. While tracing the history of women's involvement in consumption, it reveals the century long relationship between civic and consumer roles. Belisle's study is an excellent addition to Canadian consumer history that will appeal to gender, social, economic, and political historians and students alike.

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## *This Land*

### *The Story of Two Hundred Acres in Kent County, Ontario*

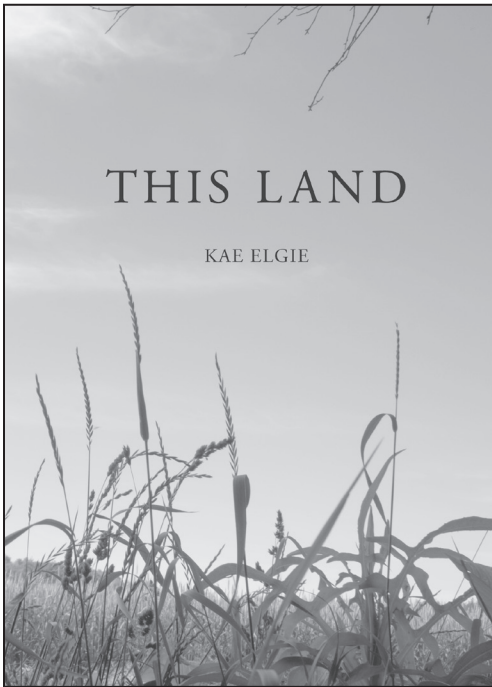
By Kae Elgie

Waterloo, Ontario: The Fountain Street Press, 2019. 492 pages. \$45.00. cloth ISBN: 978-0-9812776-3-9 ([www.fountainstreetpress.ca](http://www.fountainstreetpress.ca))

**T**his book is a treasure trove of meticulous microhistorical scholarship centred on the history of a family farm in southwestern Ontario.

A social activist and retired librar-

ian, Kae Elgie set out to write a family history, beginning with her great-great-grandfather, George Elgie, who purchased the farm in 1870—but a box of 85 mostly handwritten deeds found in the farmhouse



basement revealed a more complicated story involving several previous owners. Further inspired by Greg Curnoe's *Deeds/Abstracts: The History of a London Lot* and the many projectile points her father and brother had discovered on the farm, Elgie became curious about the deeper history of the land before it was "owned" and how and why the meaning of that land has changed over time. In *This Land*, she explores land as territory, personally owned property, and real estate; as a resource, a backdrop to other businesses, or collateral for business deals; as symbolic connection to the past; and as a legacy for succeeding generations -- all through a rich evidentiary trail tied to the two hundred acres of Fairview Farm.

Elgie's narrative is exceptional in its detailed examination of local Indigenous land use, with 37 pages of text, maps, and photographs describing thousands of years

of pre-contact history and the changing geography of the farm and its immediate region. Drawing on archaeological and Indigenous scholarship and the expertise of two avocational archaeologists, Elgie knowledgeably discusses the Paleo-Indian, Archaic and late Woodland projectile points and other tools found on the farm, always within a larger context of Indigenous cultures and worldviews. She notes the ancient trail running through the farm, later an early settler road.

Another chapter examines the lifeways of the Anishinaabeg in the area at the time of settler-colonial contact, identifying sugar and fishing camps and the trade goods and traditional foods revealed by post-contact archaeological sites. Citing Indigenous scholars, she situates the 1790 McKee Purchase Agreement and its promises that the Ojibwa could hunt and fish as before within Indigenous concepts of ongoing reciprocal giftgiving and the chaotic land allotments that began two days after the agreement. A further 1822 "cession" reserved 5,120 acres of land, including the lands of Fairview Farm, for the Big Bear Creek Ojibwa, but the Crown sold off these reserved lands in 1830, an injustice partially addressed by a \$121 million land claim settlement in 2013. Elgie draws on Indigenous scholarship to suggest the pain the Ojibwa must have felt as Europeans turned the resource-rich Ojibwa territory into the "tree-denuded landscape Europeans had known back home" (39).

The author then traces the seesawing fortunes of the first and later "owners" of those two hundred acres, illuminating the complex web of their financial transactions, and the interpenetration of local, regional, national, and international forces at work as land became a particular person's property "whose qualities and resources could be isolated and exploited

one by one” (63). Fairview Farm passed through various hands to pay debts or raise money for business opportunities elsewhere, until William Taylor established a thriving grist mill on the land’s frontage on the Sydenham river—American farmers milled their wheat there in order to export it to Britain under the Corn Laws’ preferential tariff rate. Elgie charts the development of a local commercial class as Taylor diversified into ship-building, selling timber and staves, serving as local postmaster and magistrate, and buying and selling land as real estate, i.e., “land whose future commercial potential outweighed its current natural gifts” (65). Eventually Taylor sold the land to its first farmer, George Elgie.

The author documents the changing social, economic, environmental, and agricultural circumstances of her family’s life on the farm over five generations. Drawing on extensive financial and personal family records, oral interviews, and a rich array of local and regional archival sources, she describes changing technologies and agricultural activities with exceptional specificity. She is greatly aided by her intimate knowledge of this particular farm and its features, as she describes the choices, creativity, and forethought exercised both by individuals and the extended family to keep the farm and family afloat and the factors that led some to leave farming and move into towns. She analyses when and why individuals adopted new practices (or didn’t) or made investments in new machinery or buildings; how much interest they paid on various loans; as well as what a farm wife earned from her egg and poultry business. She documents social

and political interactions with the United Farmers of Ontario, and other organizations. She is wonderfully curious about all facets of farm life.

Elgie tells—and fact-checks—many engaging family stories, vividly recreating her family’s world. One relative listed his farm income as \$116.68 on his tax return, next to which he wrote “for what that’s worth” but Elgie finds another set of meticulously calculated records that prove that he was cheating. Another may have illegally cut timber on Crown land by moonlight to finance further purchases of farmland for his sons. An Elgie widow was left with nine children aged one to twenty, while a lethargic hired hand moved in during the Depression and stayed for twenty years. Six-year-old twin boys died from eating water-hemlock root, which they mistook for parsnip; Mabel Learns died of “exhaustion” in 1916 after 24 hours of “convulsions following child birth, eclampsia” (224). Most poignant is the breaking of physical attachment to the land for many Elgie descendants, although Elgie’s brothers continue to farm the land to this day.

The author’s sardonic humour and eye for telling detail make this an enjoyable, if lengthy, read. While some of the excellent maps and photographs are so small it is difficult to make out the detail and there are occasional typesetting errors in this self-published volume, economic historians and historians of Ontario’s rural and agricultural past will appreciate Elgie’s trustworthiness as a researcher and her significant contribution to their field.

Victoria Freeman