

## Not Just Tea, Tobacco, and Salt

Review of Douglas McCalla. 2015. *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada*. Montréal and Kingston. McGill-Queens University Press. pp. 296.

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Volume 80-81, 2014–2015

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr80\\_81br04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/mcr80_81br04)

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Éditeur(s)

Cape Breton University Press

ISSN

1718-1259 (imprimé)

0000-0000 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Rankin, J. (2014). Compte rendu de [Not Just Tea, Tobacco, and Salt / Review of Douglas McCalla. 2015. *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada*. Montréal and Kingston. McGill-Queens University Press. pp. 296.] *Material Culture Review*, 80-81, 195–197.

The final section of the book, written by Judith Tannenbaum, looks at contemporary artworks that have direct links with the fraktur tradition such as Marian Bantjes artwork entitled, *My Dear, Can We Work Together* (2007). This work is a highly embellished hand painted manuscript that is done in the style of fraktur but the text is from a spam/scam email. Another work by Bantjes, *Lost Child* (2014), is a simple and colourful needlepoint composition that is made using hair from My Little Pony toys. Both these pieces are uncanny in the way that they blend the

traditional styles of fraktur with mass media and consumer culture.

The book could have benefitted from a larger print size because of the heavily embellished detail of the fraktur illustrations. However, as a whole, the publication helps animate these historical documents and brings to light this fairly obscure rural art tradition. The book and accompanying exhibition successfully use the filter of contemporary art to promote engagement with the museum's collection.

## JOYCE RANKIN

### Not Just Tea, Tobacco, and Salt

Review of

Douglas McCalla. 2015. *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada*. Montréal and Kingston. McGill-Queens University Press.

pp. 296.

It was not just tea, tobacco, and salt; it was boots, razors, and haircombs; axes, rakes and shovels; teapots, forks and needles. Of the hundreds of things that we use every day, many have been around for a long time and were used by early settlers in much the same way.

This book is a fascinating look at the everyday lives of people in rural Upper Canada between 1808 and 1861. By pouring through daybooks (the itemized ledgers kept by 19th-century storekeepers to track and document each transaction of the day) and the 30,000 transactions captured, and by including all seven of the known stores within the neighbouring townships, the author was able to build a comprehensive picture of the retail transactions that occurred as part of the life of the 750 households in the area. We see who bought what, when, and how much they paid for it. And we are provided with some understanding of why.

Daybooks listed the item, the price, and the buyer, so by cross-referencing the names with the tax rolls, the author was able to track the buying

habits of selected families in several communities in rural Upper Canada in the mid-1800s, including socially prominent families, farmers, labourers, and even servants.

Underlying the specifics of the data is a picture of a society in which one's word was one's bond. The charge accounts run by most families were tracked through the simple means of the day book and ledger. The buyer was obliged to trust the merchant to maintain an accurate accounting, and the merchant trusted the buyers to pay when they had cash, or when they had goods (eggs, honey, etc.) that could be exchanged. The servants of a household bought items or supplies on credit for general household use as well as for their own use, seemingly with the expectation on the part of both master and servant that the charges would be assigned accordingly.

Since most of the individuals did not receive a weekly wage and depended on variable and seasonal lump sums, and on the sale or trading of commodities, much commerce was done through credit. Items that were considered

necessities, whether for running a household (tea, salt, and medicine) or running a farm (axes, rakes, and seed), as well as luxury goods like alcohol, sugar, and crockery were purchased as needed (or desired), and often paid for later. The choices offered to the consumer, and the role of various items in the community life, is evident in the patterns of purchase and the changes in these over time. I was especially fascinated by the insight into the buying patterns of women in the communities, whether their purchases were intended for themselves, their houses, or their families.

The first half of the book is divided into chapters devoted to various product categories: groceries, hardware, textiles, locally produced goods, and household goods. The second half of the books contains lists and tables constructed from raw data that allows a researcher to examine the information in various ways; to focus on items or years of particular interest, or on the habits of any one particular family. It is the interpretation of the data that is so interesting, and the interpretation in the book is clearly informed by much work done by other historians, especially when placing purchases in context of national trends or historical events. But, the author points out, the data sometimes contradicts what has been previously accepted as the pattern of household purchasing.

Early on in *Consumers in the Bush*, the author takes care to dispel one myth, that of the “Crusoe-like self-sufficiency” depicted in both historical accounts and popular imagination, by showing what families and individuals actually bought. According to the data, purchases included not just the consumables they couldn’t produce, tea and salt and tobacco, along with manufactured hardware like sewing needles and axes; they sometimes bought goods that they could have made. Like consumers today, they made purchasing decisions based not only on what was available, but by deciding what was cost-effective to produce oneself, and what was not. We get a sense that choices were based on individual preference and circumstance as well, with some families, for example, continuing to weave cloth who could have purchased it, but choosing to buy their candles instead of making them.

The daybooks record transactions that contradict common historical assumptions of what was made and what was purchased. In a discussion of the purchasing of products that could reasonably be made, McCalla carefully examines the pattern of purchasing around, for example, candles. Although the common perception is that settlers and farm families made their own candles, we see from the evidence presented here that the truth is far more complex.

Not only were candles of various grades and price available for purchase, one could buy candle wicks (for the purpose of making one’s own candles), as well as the supplies to make the wicks. Quoting explanations from other historians about how everything was made from scratch, he shows instead the complexity in the range of purchases one family might make by using the example of candles. Most families bought both candles and wicks, as well as supplies that might be used in making wicks (although these supplies also have other uses). By citing the price of wicks and the frequency of their purchase, he demonstrates that, for most families, their purchases show evidence of them making their own cost-benefit analysis. (The wicks were cheap and easily available; it made sense to buy, rather than make, them.)

There was interesting discussion of the use of china and simple crockery, the social class that was revealed by the purchase of these things, and the changes in the local social standards as the community changed from a pioneer to established society.

A section on the use and relative prevalence of iron in the communities touches on the relationship of wood and iron in the context of the activities engaged in by first settlers. The systems of agriculture used by pioneers, who are at the same time felling trees and planting their first crops in the shallow soil among the stumps, is not the same as the system practiced by established farmers who are producing crops for sale. With import records starting in 1841 McCalla looks at the transitions and connections between imported iron hardware, hardware made locally from imported pig iron, hardware made locally from locally produced iron, and handmade wooden implements. The author looks closely at day-to-day use on a pioneer farm while keeping an eye on trade patterns between Britain

and Upper Canada, and the development of technology and manufacture. The patterns uncovered in this research show that iron hardware was available, was not as expensive proportionately as some historians have stated, and that settlers adopted new technology as it became available or as their needs changed, so that what may look at first glance like primitivism (i.e., the use of wooden ploughs) is, in fact, adaptation.

The book would have benefitted from some insight into the function of some items. Why was harness such an uncommon purchase? Because harness was a major purchase that, when properly cared for, lasts a very long time, and can be mended over and over by the owner. Why were implements like shovels and axes, although widely used, not a common purchase? Again, because a farm needs only as many shovels or axes as there are hands to wield them, and because they can last for many years by being sharpened, and having handles replaced.

In truth, these gaps are noticed only because the rest of the contents are so thorough.

The abundance of examples can be a bit overwhelming if one attempts to read the book in one sitting. Rather, this is the sort of book one would come back to again and again. We are provided with many fascinating nuggets and factoids: matches, which had been invented in the 1830s, first appeared in sales records in 1842, with only three purchases being recorded (despite the affordable price), and sales remaining low for several years.

And mysteries are introduced: if matches are available, affordable, and make life so much easier, why were they not purchased? Why do

purchases of oxen-related items only begin in 1861, when the use of oxen was actually beginning to wane? It is not until that year, as well, that the records of cowbells being bought first appear, though cattle had been part of the settlers' lives for many years. The author leaves us to ponder the reasons. Perhaps fashion, perhaps function, perhaps another source for obtaining them.

The common thread throughout is the way in which McCalla reminds us that the settlers and established farmers were individuals with choices to make, with an option to buy or not. In this book McCalla argues that they were consumers, with agency, and that agency was exercised in a variety of ways. They shopped. Purchases were not only of necessities, conveniences were welcomed as they became available and affordable, and people were not all the generalists they are portrayed. In addition, we are reminded of the difficulty (and folly) of making generalized statements based on a few surviving texts (see the discussion on chocolate).

Not only is the book instructive in scope, and generous in detail, a reading of it is a reminder of the ways in which seemingly useless bits of information can lead to fascinating avenues of understanding. In fact, this book begs us to wonder down those tangled byways of life's minutia. Each purchase made, after all, was part of a complex and wide-reaching global economy, and a part of the economy that was being built as the foundation of this country. I found myself imagining the day-to-day life of 19th-century homemakers and farmers with more rich detail, and more respect, than ever before; seeing them as individuals in their society.

## ANNE MARIE LANE JONAH

Review of

Terry, Andrea, 2015. *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums*. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press.

264 pp., 40 photographs, avail. hardcover, soft cover, and e-book. ISBN 9780773545625.

Andrea Terry has chosen a focused viewpoint from which to examine the current state of public history at house museums in Canada. Her work is based on studies of programs at Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, the Cartier House

in Montréal, and Mackenzie House in Toronto. Two of these houses, Dundurn and Cartier, are designated as National Historic Sites by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), and the three men associated with the