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Edna Staebler c. 1950, courtesy Edna Staebler Collection, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

## The Works of Edna Staebler: Using Literary Journalism to Celebrate the Lives of Ordinary Canadians

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**Abstract:** Edna Staebler’s legacy as one of Canada’s early, mainstream literary journalists has been overshadowed by her later success as a cookbook writer and philanthropist. But her magazine profiles from the late 1940s to the mid-1960s deserve more recognition for their richly detailed narrative style and focus on ordinary Canadian families that lived in isolated communities or were members of marginalized cultural, ethnic, and/or religious groups.

If Canadians know of Edna Staebler—and indeed, many do—it is probably not because of her journalism. Rather, it is for her series of cookbooks of Mennonite-inspired recipes, starting with *Food That Really Schmecks* in 1968.<sup>1</sup> Filled with short, unfussy recipes, including “Norm’s Chicken-Potato Chip Casserole,” “Grossmommy Martin’s Kuddlefleck,” and “Gwetcha Pie (Prune Custard Pie),” the collection was inspired by an article Staebler wrote for *Maclean’s* magazine in 1954 called “Those Mouth-watering Mennonite Meals.”<sup>2</sup> That cookbook, and the many others that followed, became a best-seller quickly and made Staebler a household name across the country. It continues to sell well today and was even made available recently as an iPad app.<sup>3</sup>

One of the unfortunate consequences of Staebler’s success as a cookbook writer was how it overshadowed her earlier work as a journalist. Between 1948 and 1965, Staebler wrote long narrative articles focused, for the most part, on ordinary Canadians and their day-to-day lives for *Maclean’s* and *Chatelaine*, two of the country’s leading magazines. Her pieces were noteworthy not only because of their literary, narrative style but also because of their subjects. Instead of profiling politicians, business leaders, or celebrities, Staebler wrote

about ordinary Canadians. Whether it was a community of African American slave descendants in Nova Scotia, the Hutterites of Alberta, or a family of Italian immigrants in downtown Toronto, she showed a particular interest in learning about those living in isolated regions of the country and the many minority groups that comprise Canada's multicultural mosaic. As part of her research, Staebler would routinely spend a week or more living with her subjects, taking part in their usual activities while asking questions and recording notes. The articles that resulted from this immersive, almost ethnographic type of reporting were richly detailed narratives, full of scenes, anecdotes, and dialogue, which brought her subjects to life for readers. As popular as Staebler's articles were with readers—and despite the role they played in helping to shape the country's postwar multicultural identity—they have been mostly forgotten today in light of Staebler's fame as a cookbook writer and, later, philanthropist. As such, this essay will argue that Staebler's journalistic work deserves wider recognition, both in terms of expanding the canon of Canadian literary journalism and in highlighting the work of early female literary journalists whose contributions have often been overlooked.

### **Becoming a Writer: Half a Life's Work**

Staebler was born Edna Cress in 1906, in the small town of Berlin (now Kitchener), Ontario.<sup>4</sup> Her father was a shopkeeper who provided his family with a comfortable, middle-class life.<sup>5</sup> After high school, Staebler earned a Bachelor of Arts and then her teaching certification at the University of Toronto. It was there she met and became engaged to her future husband, Keith. They were married in 1933 and returned to Kitchener.<sup>6</sup> After short stints working in her father's shop and then in the classroom, Staebler became primarily a society wife. It was a role she did not relish. In her published diaries, she wrote:

This business of being married and doing nothing with a brain, which may or may not be any good is too, too awful. I must do something. I resent just being a housewife like all the dumb gals I went to school with and couldn't be bothered talking much 'cause they had nothing to say, no vision, and now we're married and they're all better housekeepers than I am, and I do nothing to prove to myself or anyone else that I have any brains at all.<sup>7</sup>

Staebler had long dreamed of becoming a novelist, but suffered from a lack of inspiration and self-confidence. She received little encouragement from either her mother or her husband, who insisted that writing was a waste of time for women and urged her to content herself with being a wife.<sup>8</sup> But that was an increasingly difficult challenge: by 1940, Staebler's marriage had soured. Her husband had turned out to be an emotionally abusive alcoholic

who was rarely home; in addition, he had engaged in multiple extramarital affairs.<sup>9</sup> Staebler considered divorcing him but could not conceive of a way to support herself as a single woman or survive the social stigma associated with divorce during that period.<sup>10</sup>

It was around this time that Staebler began to imagine—and take steps toward creating—a life that was more focused on her own needs and interests. Her first step was figuring out how to become a better writer and increase the likelihood of being able to write professionally. She had contributed to her university newspaper during school, which inspired her to begin a correspondence course in newspaper writing. She did not complete it because it did not feel like the right fit for her: “I am interested in developing a personal literary style,” she wrote, “not straight newspaper reporting or sob stuff or that sort of thing.”<sup>11</sup> Around this time, Staebler also became more interested in the world beyond Kitchener, partly because of the wayward soldiers, home from the war and down on their luck, that Keith would bring home and expect Staebler to clothe, feed, and mother.<sup>12</sup> It was not a responsibility that Staebler welcomed, but meeting these men and learning about their lives and experiences overseas inspired her to find out more about how other people lived. As Alyson King notes, Staebler had a wide-ranging curiosity and an openness to questioning and challenging her own beliefs, as well as prevailing social norms, that developed during her time at university. It was an environment in which she “struggled to find a sense of self and purpose and to reconcile the familiar traditions with new ideas about evolution, religion, and nation.”<sup>13</sup> In this way, King says, she was typical of female university students at the time. Raised Presbyterian, Staebler embraced challenges to her faith and worldview. She was also influenced by the social gospel and the idea of becoming a missionary, both to do good and as a way to see the world.<sup>14</sup> As such, it was not unexpected that meeting the war veterans her husband brought home and hearing about their lives, which were so different from her own, would have awakened a long-held, dormant desire to see other parts of Canada and the world, as she had expressed in her diary at the age of nineteen: “If I’d be an old maid I’d want to travel all the time, only then I wouldn’t have enough money and I’d really need an awful lot. My ambition has always been to travel and see everything. I must do it somehow.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1943, Staebler travelled from Ontario to Nova Scotia by train to the city of Lunenburg, which she wanted to visit as it had been settled by German immigrants—much like her own hometown. Upon her return weeks later, Keith told her that the letters she had sent home describing her trip proved better reading than most books and that she should think about writing professionally.<sup>16</sup> Although this was the first time Keith had supported her efforts

as a writer, it was not the first time she had been praised for her letter writing, as she had many long-time correspondents around the world.

Staebler was taken with the landscape and people of the coastal towns of Nova Scotia. In August 1945, she set out to make an extended exploration of the province with a couple of her pen pals, leaving behind her troubled home life and failing marriage. Not long into the trip, one of her travelling companions made his amorous intentions clear to Staebler, who did not share his feelings and quickly tired of his advances. So much so that one day, she demanded he stop the car and leave her, along with her luggage, at the side of the road en route to her sister's home in Halifax.<sup>17</sup> As her biographer, Veronica Ross, writes: "She was thirty-nine years old, a slim woman wearing a pantsuit, and she was stranded in this tiny village of weather-beaten houses rising above the Atlantic on the northern tip of the Cabot Trail. No hotels, no phone even, only one small store, chickens scratching in the yards."<sup>18</sup>

Staebler had wound up in the tiny fishing village of Neil's Harbour in Cape Breton, home to just a few hundred people, mostly immigrants from Newfoundland who had distinct accents and traditions from those of most Nova Scotians.<sup>19</sup> She found the villagers warm and welcoming and altogether less stuffy and snobby than those in whose circles she moved at home in Kitchener. At a time when her own family life was difficult, she was moved by how quickly the locals embraced her as part of their community. As Ross notes, "She was not Mrs. Staebler but 'our Aidna' who had arrived like a gypsy and stayed to become almost one of them."<sup>20</sup> As such, her unplanned stay in Neil's Harbour stretched to three weeks. Staebler enjoyed learning more about the locals' way of life in such an isolated spot, where things seemed simpler and more peaceful than at home, harkening back to the prewar era. During her stay, she sent long letters home about the people of Neil's Harbour. She began taking notes, which soon numbered in the hundreds of pages. At long last, the would-be novelist who could never come up with a workable idea had stumbled upon some promising source material.

But even with so much inspiration and so many notes, writing did not come easily to Staebler after she returned home. Her correspondence course in newspaper writing was no help in figuring out how to write the novel she had in mind, so she floundered. Then, at a meeting of the Canadian Women's Club, Staebler happened to meet Dr. John Robins, a Governor General's Award-winning novelist and professor at the University of Toronto's Victoria College.<sup>21</sup> They became friends, and he became a writing mentor to her. Crucially, he introduced her to the genre creative nonfiction, to which she took an immediate liking. As she explained in her diary, "Robins gave expert, technical advice. It was all right to tell the story simply, he advised, but the

narrative could provide a way to convey profound reflection, a philosophy of life and man and nature.”<sup>22</sup> She eventually completed a manuscript for a novel about a fictionalized Neil’s Harbour, which drew heavily on her own experiences. Despite her diligent efforts to find a publishing house, it was not to be. Publishers told her that Canadian readers were not interested in such regional fare and said the book had no hope of selling enough copies to break even, let alone make a profit.<sup>23</sup>

Although Staebler found the rejections dispiriting, she continued to revise her manuscript, which had become a labor of love, and to seek out new publishers. Three years later, someone suggested to Staebler that instead of trying to have her novel published, she rework some of the material she collected in Neil’s Harbour as a news article. Although she had never wanted to become a reporter or do any sort of journalistic writing—apart from her contributions to the University of Toronto’s student newspaper—Staebler was determined to get her work published. She spent the next six weeks writing a twenty-four-page manuscript about a day she spent with sailors on a swordfish expedition. Then, in May 1948, unaware of the protocol for submitting an article for publication, she drove to Toronto to deliver her manuscript to the offices of *Maclean’s* in person. She then returned home and gave it little more thought, continuing to revise her novel. One week later, a *Maclean’s* editor called her with an offer to publish a slightly condensed version of her article for \$150 in the magazine’s July issue.<sup>24</sup> With that, at age forty, Staebler became a published writer for the first time.

That article, titled “Duelists of the Deep,” after the fishermen who used spears to snare swordfish, was unlike most of the articles found in the magazine at the time, both for its literary style of writing and because it was a feature-length piece focused not on politicians, business leaders, or celebrities, but rather fishermen. The article began with a scene written in the first person:

Far below us, silhouetted by a glittering sea, was a little boat with a figure swaying at the top of her sailless mast. I drove slowly to watch her idle motion. Suddenly a man ran on to the end of her bowsprit. For a moment he was suspended, then he lunged forward from the waist, poised with an arm extended, recovered, paused for an instant and dashed back to obscurity in the hull. A figure on the mast had dropped to the deck.

I couldn’t see the deck details clearly from where I was, but I knew the men on the boat had a swordfish. I felt it, and I was excited, and the winding road down to the village had never seemed so long. I was afraid I wouldn’t get there in time to see them bring it in.<sup>25</sup>

The story followed Staebler to the wharf, where she, amid a crowd of local onlookers, saw her first swordfish:

It was stupendous. The body was round; the skin, dark purple-grey, rough one way, smooth the other, like a cat's tongue; the horny black fins stood out like scimitars, the tail like the handle bars of a giant bicycle; but the strangest thing was the straight, flat, pointed, sharp-sided sword which was an extension of the head—an upper lip more than three feet long.<sup>26</sup>

Her sense of excitement and wonder comes across clearly in her writing, as carefully chosen details bring the scene to life. Staebler herself, as a character in the piece, is another important aspect of what makes the story so engaging, as a stand-in for the reader, as is evident in the following scene:

A little boy knelt near the head of the dead fish; with a rusty hook he ripped open the glazed membrane of the huge round eye that was upper-most. Out of the cavity ran clear, slurpy liquid, reminiscent of the kind hairdressers use. With a shudder I watched the child put his hand into the socket and pull something out of it. He looked at me.

“Want te heyeball?” he asked, stretching his hand toward me.

He opened his hand and I saw a perfect sphere about an inch and a quarter in diameter, clear as glass, reflecting the colors of the sea, the hills and the setting sun like a soap bubble; it was beautiful.

“Take it,” he said.

“You mean you're giving it to me?”

“Yes.” (Not yeah.)

I couldn't spurn a gift; reluctantly I held out my hand. The boy placed the crystal gently on my palm. It felt cool and tender as a piece of very firm jelly or a gumdrop that has had the sugar licked off it.<sup>27</sup>

In her first published piece of writing, Staebler's writing is assured, polished, and engaging. Her curiosity and excitement at watching the swordfish cleaned and wanting to learn more about how it was caught was enough to convince one crew to take her on board for their next expedition, as the article goes on to detail. More than merely a postcard travelogue, Staebler's article showed *Maclean's* readers what it was like to go out on the ocean in search of swordfish in finely wrought detail, but also provided a clear sense of the challenges inherent in making a living as an East Coast fisherman.

It was an unusual article for *Maclean's* for a number of reasons. As noted, it focused on the lives of ordinary people—fishermen and their families—as



far from the country's economic and political centers as could be. Second, it was a feature-length article written by a woman—and a first-time writer at that. Although other women wrote for the magazine at the time, including noted author and social activist June Callwood, it was still far from the norm. Their pieces tended to be more conventionally newsy in tone and approach, and focused on issues of social justice.<sup>28</sup> Staebler's article, on the other hand, was unabashedly personal and narrative. For most *Maclean's* readers, it served as an introduction to what would now be referred to as literary journalism, a type of writing that resonated with many readers and set Staebler on a career path that she could never have imagined.

### **The Reluctant (Literary) Journalist**

To be sure, Staebler never considered herself a journalist. She felt her true calling was to become a novelist, and her magazine work was something she did when she was unable to publish her fiction. Her interest was not in breaking or relaying important news, but in sharing stories about Canadians from different walks of life and trying to understand people and her country better. Regardless, it is clear that she was, in fact, performing the role of a journalist and producing journalism, not only because her articles were published in two of Canada's leading magazines for a period of about twenty years, but also because they involved on-the-ground, independent research, reporting, and interviewing—they were not mere travelogues or columns.

Part of the reason why Staebler may not have seen herself as a journalist was because the type of journalism she created was so different than what most conventional news journalists were producing at the time. Her articles reflected her interest in learning about the day-to-day lives of ordinary people in far-flung parts of the country. She was a storyteller at heart. She had a keen eye for detail and a good ear for dialogue. She captured the rhythms of how people spoke, often recreating her subjects' dialects in her articles. Indeed, it was that difference in approach and style that appealed to her editors and readers. As Staebler recalled, her editor at *Maclean's*, Pierre Berton, told his junior editors that while they were allowed to work with Staebler to condense her drafts, they were not allowed to alter her phrasing for fear of altering her style.<sup>29</sup> Today, it is clear that while she may not have set out to create works of literary journalism, the fact that she ended up doing so is incontrovertible.

According to Norman Sims, the hallmarks of literary journalism as a genre include the use of immersion reporting; richly detailed, accurate reporting; symbolic representation; the inclusion of the writer's voice; a heightened literary style; and, often, the search for meaning in everyday events and people. All of these attributes are present in Staebler's magazine work, with

the exception of symbolic representation, as she preferred a more realistic, straightforward, descriptive style.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, most of these hallmarks were present from her first piece, “Duelists of the Deep,” not because she was following any sort of checklist. Rather, she used those techniques because they allowed her to tell the story she wanted. In other words, it was natural. In many ways, the approach and techniques she used by instinct for that first story ended up forming a template of sorts for all of the articles that followed.

From the start, it was essential for Staebler to spend time with her subjects and immerse herself in their lives. Not only did it strike her as the best way to get to know the people she was writing about, but, as important, the method had worked out so well for her while reporting “Duelists of the Deep” that doing something different made no sense. Similarly, it was an approach whose results appealed to her editors, including Berton. He was so impressed with her first story that he was quick to assign another. This time, he asked her to write a feature article about Old Order Mennonites in the Kitchener area. He wanted the same narrative take she had used to report on the fishermen of Neil’s Harbour. Staebler was not immediately interested—she did not consider herself a journalist and felt her time was probably better spent revising her novel.<sup>31</sup> But she eventually agreed, warning Berton that she knew little about the Mennonites apart from having noticed them around town in their horse-drawn buggies. Having had no journalistic training and being unsure of how to begin, Staebler decided to approach the assignment the same way she had done in Cape Breton. She dropped by the general store in St. Jacob’s, a hub for Mennonites because of its farmers’ market, and asked if anyone knew a friendly Mennonite family who might agree to let her live with and write about them.<sup>32</sup> Someone suggested the Kramer family, who lived on a nearby ancestral farm. It speaks highly of Staebler’s charm, sincerity, and persistence that she was able to convince the Kramers (whom she called the Martins in her article and subsequent pieces about them, so as to protect their privacy) to let her live with them and write about their lives and traditions, given how private Old Order Mennonites tend to be. Staebler recalled that while they were initially apprehensive about receiving so much attention, they were won over by her goal of wanting to show Canadians what they were really like, beyond the rumors that circulated about them:

“You don’t want to make fun of us?” the Martins were anxious when I asked if I might live with them for a few days and to learn and write about them. Though humble and trustful the Martins were always alert.

We used our Christian names. They were natural and pleasant, and answered my questions thoughtfully, trustfully, generously, and asked me

many in return—only Grossdoddy [Grandfather], listening with a gentle smile, took no part.<sup>33</sup>

Staebler spent as much time as possible with the family as they went about their usual routines. She helped with cooking and farm chores, shared meals with the family, and accompanied them to church services. She employed a similar fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants strategy for another of her early *Maclean's* pieces, a 1952 story about a colony of Hutterites in Alberta.<sup>34</sup> In an out-of-print anthology of some of her favorite magazine work, Staebler explained that after accepting the assignment, she researched the Hutterites at the Kitchener library, “[t]hen I got on a train bound for Lethbridge [, Alberta]; from there I took a bus for Waterton Lakes to see mountains and to try to find a Hutterite colony.”<sup>35</sup> While on the bus, she overheard a young woman speaking with the driver and discovered she was a teacher at the Old Elm colony. After Staebler explained what she was doing there, the woman offered her a cot in her room:

[Y]ou’re welcome to stay with me until Wednesday—that’s when my husband is coming back from a Mormon mission on the east coast. I haven’t seen him for more than a year and I want to be with him alone.” She grinned. “But by that time you may have got acquainted with some of the people and talked them into letting you stay with them.”<sup>36</sup>

Once again, Staebler’s unusual approach proved successful. Within days of her arrival, she was invited to sleep on a cot in the bedroom of two sisters who shared three rooms in the colony with their parents and brother. She received a warm welcome from the Hutterites and was invited to visit several homes each evening.<sup>37</sup> Even though she had stumbled on to this type of immersion research after becoming stranded in Neil’s Harbour, it was a successful method for Staebler and became one of her trademarks. Describing the importance of her approach, she later wrote:

A journalist friend once said to me, “Edna, why do you spend so much time doing research on the people you write about? I simply make a long list of questions, get all the answers in an hour or two, then come home and write my piece.”

I didn’t dispute her method but I couldn’t work that way. For me it presupposed too much, merely got answers to something already half-known; there was no place for surprises and all those delightful things that happen when you become friends with people, and they are natural in your presence and you learn from them by living their lives with them until you feel you have assimilated enough to write an understanding piece about them.<sup>38</sup>

Another of Staebler’s trademarks, evident in all of her articles, was her

eye for detail and how she was able to bring people and places alive for readers through her writing. In the 1950 *Maclean's* story, "Isles of Codfish and Champagne," she describes the French island of St. Pierre off the coast of Newfoundland in Atlantic Canada, a hub for American bootleggers during Prohibition:

There are no bootlegging boats in the harbour now, the smell of cod is stronger than that of rum, empty liquor warehouses on 11th of November Street are used for prize fights and French movies. In the cafés fishermen drink champagne, on the waterfront straw-stuffed sabots clatter, and Chanel No. 5 is displayed in a hundred shop windows with leeks, Benedictine and gay things from Paris.<sup>39</sup>

She skillfully uses details to juxtapose the islanders' continental pretensions with their reality of living on a tiny, single-industry French outpost. On the one hand, they have easy access to:

cartons of delicate wafers, boiled sweets, chocolate and pickles from France. Handmade French lace is twenty cents a yard. There are dainty kid gloves, Swiss watches for fifteen dollars, pipes, jewelry, cameras, for a song, and cosmetics, the very best, for fifty francs a box. Perfumes that are forty dollars in Montreal are four dollars in St. Pierre.<sup>40</sup>

On the other, Staebler describes the heart of the island's economy:

Le Frigo, the great concrete fish-freezing plant . . . stands on the edge of the roadstead. Except for one room, used for storing food and bait, the decaying building, which cost seventeen million francs, has not been freezing fish for thirty years, yet it represents the colony's only industry: the shipping of fish caught off the shores of the islands and the transshipping of salt cod brought in by the trawlers.<sup>41</sup>

With these well-chosen details, Staebler shows readers, instead of telling them outright, the central irony about life on St. Pierre: that while the islanders may have easy and inexpensive access to high-end French goods and pretensions to living better than their Canadian neighbors, they are, in fact, no better off.

Staebler's voice is present in most of her magazine articles, often posing questions to her subjects in long excerpts of dialogue. For example, in her article about Old Order Mennonites in the Kitchener area, she explored how different they were from most Canadians. They used electricity and tractors, but would not buy cars or radios; they would not pose for photographs, but did not mind being captured in candid shots; they declined old age and family allowances, and refused to go to court or war. At the end of the story, she remarks on the peace that comes from their lifestyle:

The last night of my stay in the fieldstone house I said, “I haven’t heard a grumbling word since I came here. Don’t you ever get mad? Don’t your children ever quarrel? Are you never tired of working? Do you never break your rules?”

They looked at each other and laughed. “We’re all extra good just now because you’re here,” Levina said.

“We’re telling you what all we’re supposed to do but we don’t always do it,” Hannah grinned.

“You are so quiet,” Salema said to me. “What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking how peaceful it is here. In the world I’m going back to we are always fighting for peace,” I said.<sup>42</sup>

In some cases, Staebler’s use of her own authorial voice expands until she becomes a full-fledged character in her story. Nowhere is she more present in an article than in a 1956 piece for *Maclean’s* in which she sets out to learn about the residents of Nova Scotia’s New Road Settlement, outside of Halifax, who were descendants of African American slaves.<sup>43</sup> Tellingly, it appears to be the only time that Staebler undertook an assignment to live with people and tell their story and did not receive a warm welcome. The secretary of the local school board wanted to know why she had come to New Road, why she was “picking on” them, and spent more than an hour trying to dissuade her from doing so.<sup>44</sup> Instead, Staebler decided to stay in a nearby village and spent a week visiting New Road during the day. Her results were mixed: while some people were happy to visit with her early on, others were suspicious of her questions about where they and their forebears had come from.

Toward the end of her trip, Staebler tried to take photographs of some of the children. She winds up watching a fight between two girls on the street, one of whom later warns her away from taking so many photographs:

[W]e came to the road that ran down past the church. Sitting on the bank at the corner there must have been a dozen women and twice as many children. They all stared at me, the women with suspicious hostility in their black eyes. Ogerine looked uneasy. She muttered, “So long,” and sat on the bank with the rest of them. I walked on alone. I heard someone mutter, “Git out o’here.”

Next day, no one spoke to me in New Road. Mothers called their children into the houses, slammed the doors and watched me through the windows as I passed. School children cried, “Run, here she comes.” The girls hid behind the school and under its steps, the boys dodged into the paths through the bushes or formed a tight five-deep ring around me that gave me no

freedom of action. Dodging my camera became a kind of game. They taunted me, said “Can’t take my pitcher.” When I sat in my car they peered at me through the windows, breathed on the glass, called me names.

Stones were thrown into puddles as I passed between them on the road. Something hit my chin. Small angry black faces appeared and disappeared wherever I walked. The little children who had been so eager and friendly before, now looked frightened and ran when they saw me.<sup>45</sup>

This kind of open hostility was new for Staebler, and she wrote about it in detail, explaining how her presence had overtaken the story she had wanted to tell. Her frustrations are also clear about how, despite her best intentions, many of the New Road residents felt that she was interfering with their lives and had no business photographing or writing about them without their permission. Today, it seems obvious why the New Road residents would be suspicious of a privileged, white woman arriving with the goal of telling their story and taking photographs freely for a national magazine. Staebler concedes that their hostility toward her and suspicion about her motives may be connected to their experience of discrimination, but her frustration and hurt feelings are evident. This emotional interference makes her a central character in the article in a way that did not happen in other pieces.

There is no question that Staebler’s writing has literary style. She was not given to the use of symbolism or especially complex narratives. She was partial to an essay style, and began her stories with history and cultural context, followed by a description of the setting, before introducing her characters. Her writing was not complicated: she preferred a style that was clear, forthright, and filled with detail. In her 1951 profile of Maggie Ingraham, a young woman leaving behind her life and family in Neil’s Harbour for Toronto, Staebler describes the setting:

Old men whittle in the sun by the grey shingle stages clustered around the shore. Young men sway on the masts of the swordfishing boats as they search for the previous prey. Codfisherman wearing rubber boots and trousers split their catch on the blood-encrusted jetties. Their speech has the rich gusty tang of the Newfoundlanders who crossed the Cabot Strait, cleared the shallow earth around the Harbor and established their holdings by squatters’ rights eighty years ago.

There is little movement in the village: the occasional flash of color as a woman crosses a yard, the slow roaming of cows and horses outside the fences, the playing of children at the docks and on the roads. And there is little sound: only the whisper of the water, the shouts and laughter of the people, the calling of the birds, the moaning of the bell buoy.<sup>46</sup>

In another profile of a miner's family in northern Ontario, Staebler provides the following description of the Gordon (Porky) Wheatley and his job:

Porky, whose prickly crewcut hair accounts for his nickname, is quiet and calm, with a muscular, slim-hipped physique developed by weightlifting, boxing and work. He likes to play poker, go fishing and hunt moose, but each working day he dutifully leaves the security of his sunlight and sinks down into the darkness that is dripping and cold, the air thick with stone dust and blasting smoke. He wears a hard helmet with a light on the front, shatterproof glasses, rubber trousers and jacket, steel-toed boots and heavy gloves. He uses a grease-splattering rock drill that is gradually deafening him and dynamite that could blow him to bits if he's careless.<sup>47</sup>

Her writing is notable for its precision and clarity. It wasn't literary in the sense that it was overdone. Like a journalist, Staebler favored concision and precision.

As discussed, Staebler's magazine articles meet most of the crucial criteria for literary journalism, as set out by Sims. In many cases, the groups or cultures her subjects belong to are minorities, such as the country's small, isolated populations of Amish, Hutterites, and Mennonites; east coast fishermen and their families; and northern Ontario miners.<sup>48</sup> Almost all of the stories focus on ordinary, everyday people, which suited Staebler. As she wrote in her diary: "[T]hey were good pieces, talking of the life of people in Canada who had no self-expression and were perhaps misunderstood by other Canadians."<sup>49</sup>

### **The Call of Cookbooks**

In 1954, Staebler wrote a second piece for *Macleans* about the Kitchener-area Old Order Mennonites, this time focusing on their recipes and cooking traditions. It was something of a passion project for her, given that she had remained close with the Kramer family since first writing about them. It was also a respite from her increasingly strained marriage. In 1961, after spending time at a rehabilitation farm, her husband Keith asked Staebler for a divorce and she consented.<sup>50</sup> One year later, she moved to the couple's cottage on Sunfish Lake, where she would spend the rest of her life, and focused on her writing.<sup>51</sup> After her Mennonite cooking article was published, she fielded many offers from publishers to create a cookbook. While Staebler accepted one, it was not something she took seriously at first. She later admitted to feeling embarrassed about the concept, and worked on it only as a side project while researching and writing other articles.<sup>52</sup> Those feelings dissipated after the book was published and became an overnight bestseller. She saw how it resonated with readers, with its simple recipes, warm, folksy tone, and vivid anecdotes about the people who provided them. Its brisk sales also gave her

the leverage, at last, to succeed in having her novel published. Twenty-seven years after Staebler was dropped off at the side of the road in Neil's Harbour and started work on the manuscript, *Cape Breton Harbour* was published in 1972 when Staebler was sixty-six.<sup>53</sup> As she said repeatedly during the rest of her life, it was the proudest achievement of her career.

As previously noted, Staebler's *Food That Really Schmecks* marked a turning point in her career. As her recognition grew as a cookbook writer, she gave up most of her other writing, as she loved testing recipes and having friends over to Sunfish Lake to taste them. She was also inspired by the response she received from readers, in person and through letters, about how much the cookbook meant to them:

I had this guilty feeling [about writing cookbooks] but as soon as I started autographing, I thought: What's wrong with that? Here I've written a book so many people have really enjoyed. A woman in England said whenever she felt homesick, she pulled out my cookbook. Before, I felt as though I were doing an inferior thing. I didn't think about writing a novel after that.<sup>54</sup>

Staebler died in 2006, in her 101st year, by which point she had published a series of successful cookbooks and become known as a generous philanthropist, endowing a \$10,000 annual book award for creative nonfiction at Wilfrid Laurier University<sup>55</sup> and a writer-in-residence program at the Kitchener Public Library,<sup>56</sup> among many other contributions. She was, by all accounts, a remarkable woman, all the more reason it is unfortunate that her early magazine work has been overlooked. A collection of her favorite profiles was published in 1983, along with updates about some of the people and places she wrote about twenty years earlier.<sup>57</sup> A different publisher printed the volume in 1990 under a new title, but it, too, has since gone out of print.<sup>58</sup> The original versions of Staebler's articles are partially available in databases, microfiche, or in archives,<sup>59</sup> which makes them inaccessible for most readers. This may partly explain why Staebler's groundbreaking work as a female literary journalist has gone unnoticed.

But exposing these works to a larger audience of readers, students, and researchers is an important step in expanding the canon of literary journalism in Canada, as well as highlighting the work of female literary journalists around the world. For this reason, closer analysis of her articles is warranted, as is a consideration of her first cookbook itself, *Food That Really Schmecks*, as an example of literary journalism, with its many anecdotes and scenes about the recipes' contributors. For, as Nancy L. Roberts has suggested, it is important for scholars to look beyond the mainstream media, in heretofore unlikely places—women's magazines, letters, diaries, and perhaps even cookbooks—to discover and understand better women's literary journalism.<sup>60</sup>



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### Notes

1. Edna Staebler, *Food That Really Schmecks: Mennonite Country Cooking as Prepared by My Mennonite Friend, Bevy Martin, My Mother and Other Fine Cooks* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).
2. Edna Staebler, "Those Mouth-watering Mennonite Meals," *Maclean's*, April 1, 1954, 20–21, 60–63.
3. "Food That Really Schmecks," Wilfrid Laurier University Press, <http://www.wlu.ca/press/Catalog/staebler-food.shtml>.
4. Christl Verduyn, ed., *Must Write: Edna Staebler's Diaries* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 17.
5. Veronica Ross, *To Experience Wonder: Edna Staebler: A Life* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2003), 50.
6. *Ibid.*, 51–52.
7. Verduyn, 65.
8. Ross, 97.
9. *Ibid.*, 191
10. *Ibid.*, 104.
11. *Ibid.*, 65.
12. *Ibid.*, 82.
13. Alyson E. King, "Embracing the Modern: Edna Cress Staebler at the University of Toronto, 1926–1929," *Historical Studies in Education* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 69–88.
14. *Ibid.*, 77–78.
15. Verduyn, 31.
16. *Ibid.*, 84.
17. *Ibid.*, 91.
18. Ross, 91.
19. *Ibid.*, 92.
20. *Ibid.*, 92.
21. One of the Governor General of Canada's responsibilities is to recognize annually the achievements of Canadians in arts and academia.

22. Ross, 101.
23. Ibid., 131.
24. Ibid., 116.
25. Edna Staebler, "Duelists of the Deep," *Maclean's*, July 15, 1948, 18.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Nancy Silcox, *Edna's Circle: Edna Staebler's Century of Friendships* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007), 44.
29. Ross, 15.
30. Norman Sims, "The Art of Literary Journalism," in *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, eds. Norman Sims and Mark Kramer (New York: Ballantine, 1995), 5.
31. Ross, 131.
32. *An Attentive Life: Conversations with Edna Staebler*, dir. Stephanie Walker (Kitchener, ON: WindSight/Wilfrid Laurier University, 1995), videocassette, 48 min.
33. Edna Staebler, "How to Live Without Wars and Wedding Rings," *Maclean's*, April 1, 1950, 15.
34. Edna Staebler, "The Lord Will Take Care of Us," *Maclean's*, March 15, 1952, 14–15, 42–46.
35. Edna Staebler, *Whatever Happened to Maggie and Other People I've Known* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1983), 87.
36. Ibid.
37. Staebler, "Lord Will Take Care of Us," 44.
38. Staebler, *Maggie*, 224.
39. Edna Staebler, "The Isles of Codfish and Champagne," *Maclean's*, November 1, 1950, 8.
40. Ibid., 45–46.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., 44.
43. Edna Staebler, "Would You Change the Lives of These People?" *Maclean's*, May 12, 1956.
44. Ibid., 56.
45. Ibid., 62.
46. Edna Staebler, "Maggie's Leaving Home," *Maclean's*, November 1, 1951, 23.
47. Edna Staebler, "Miner's Wife," *Chatelaine*, March 1962, 36.
48. Hard copies of all of Staebler's magazine work are available in the Edna Staebler Collection (XR1MSA700) at Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library, Ontario, Canada.
49. Verduyn, 143.
50. Ross, 188.
51. Ibid., 193.
52. Ibid., 203.
53. Edna Staebler, *Cape Breton Harbour* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1972).

54. Ross, 232.

55. "Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction," Wilfrid Laurier University, [https://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp\\_id=2529&pv=1](https://www.wlu.ca/homepage.php?grp_id=2529&pv=1).

56. "Edna Staebler Writer-in-Residence," Kitchener Public Library, [http://www.kpl.org/programs/contests\\_exhibits/writer\\_res.html](http://www.kpl.org/programs/contests_exhibits/writer_res.html).

57. Staebler, *Maggie*.

58. Edna Staebler, *Places I've Been and People I've Known: Stories from Across Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1990).

59. The Edna Staebler Collection, which contains materials including magazine articles, correspondence, diaries, letters, and manuscripts, is available in the University of Guelph Library's Archival and Special Collections, in Guelph, Canada.

60. Nancy L. Roberts, "Firing the Canon: The Historical Search for Literary Journalism's Missing Links," *Literary Journalism Studies* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 81–93.