

THIESSEN, Janis – *Snacks: A Canadian Food History*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Pp. 344.

It is refreshing to find a book about snack foods that does not join the chorus of denunciations about how they are “junk food” wreaking havoc on our health. In the introduction to her book, Janis Thiessen cites approvingly the small band of food writers who are beginning to balk at the moralistic jeremiads about the dangers of “industrial foods” sounded by such critics as Michael Pollan. She regards their calls for a return to a preindustrial Golden Age of “unprocessed,” “artisanal,” and “slow food” as middle-class nostalgia that ignores the harsh realities of most people’s lives, especially poorer ones, past and present. She defends snack foods against such charges as being responsible for the “obesity epidemic” and seeks to absolve at least some of the people who make them from complicity in ruining our nation’s diet. When eaten in moderation, she says, these highly processed foods provide many people with a lot of pleasure, and no one should be ashamed of working in an industry that provides such delights.

I say she absolves “some of the people who make them” because, at the same time, she still condemns our “industrial” food system as one dominated by “Big Food,” greedy multinational conglomerates who profit by degrading our food supply. This, at least, is her justification for studying the few Canadian snack food manufacturers who have managed to escape the clutches of these behemoths. Although there seems to be little real difference between their products and those of “Big Food,” she would like us to believe that by patronizing them we will be able to indulge in the pleasures of snack foods without helping to fill the monsters’ coffers.

One problem with this is that the pickings are very slim. Indeed, the company that she discusses the most, the Old Dutch potato chip company, is in fact a branch of a large American company. She tries to finesse this by arguing that, like foreign-owned Labatt Brewing Company, it is widely regarded as Canadian, especially by Winnipeggers impressed by its good labour relations, and by Laureen Harper, the wife of former prime minister, Stephen Harper, who was a high-profile fan. The rest of the companies studied are a rather mixed bag, including small potato chip manufacturers in New Brunswick and British Columbia, three chocolate manufacturers—only one of whom managed to survive the industry’s massive consolidation—and some minor candy makers in Manitoba, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland. These are supplemented with stories of other companies that did not survive “Big Food” competition.

Curiously, one company that did survive, the makers of Cheezies, did so in what some regard as a typically Canadian way. After its American parent went bankrupt, the company ended up producing Cheezies in the small town of Belleville, Ontario, where it established a paternalistic relationship with its workers and the community. It resolutely refuses to toot its own horn with advertising or to expand production, relying on the word-of-mouth of aficionados who regard its product as far superior to the conglomerate competitors, such as Cheetos, to keep the factory humming. Otherwise, there seems to be little to

differentiate the Canadian companies in the book from the American ones. Indeed, the giant American-owned Mars corporation is now boasting of how its facility producing Maltesers (my favourite candy) in the small town of Bolton, Ontario, has established the same kind of community roots.

Thiessen also calls this book a contribution to labour history, but I wonder about that. Yes, it uses sixty-one oral history interviews with people in the business, many of whom were workers, and there are interesting descriptions of the automated machines that replaced workers in some of the plants. However, many of the interviews, and much of the text, involve changes in ownership, product development, production methods, and marketing techniques that have little to do directly with people on the shop floor. In many places it reads more like business history than labour history. Granted, there is a welcome emphasis on labour in the chapter on chocolate manufacturing, where she deftly contrasts the chocolate manufacturers' promotion of their products as romantic gifts to make women happy with the gendered organization of labour in their factories, where poorly paid women had access to only the most menial, repetitive jobs. Still, a sizeable section of that chapter is also devoted to the comments of a small Facebook group of fans of a confection called Cuban Lunch, which was produced by a chocolate company that went out of business. What this has to do with labour history (or business history) is not at all clear to me.

Nor is there any indication of the relevance of the final chapter, which consists mainly of viewers' and participants' reminiscences of a TV show called Kids Bids, that played on some local stations in the West in the 1950s and 1960s. Sponsored by Old Dutch potato chips, it had children who had collected enough of the product's empty bags and boxes appear on the show and bid on prizes, culminating with a bicycle.

Surprisingly, one of the most interesting-sounding labour history interviews seem to have slipped from the author's hands. The chapter on small potato chip makers has some interesting interviews with workers describing the techniques used to make small-batch chips, but apparently there was no time for a follow-up interview with an employee at Covered Bridge, a small, family-owned New Brunswick company, to assess his reaction to the bitter five-month strike for union recognition that took place four months after the interview. The strike began after the recalcitrant owner told the workers that the union's pitch was "bull shit" and their resolve to stay out was reinforced when he ended a government mediation attempt by telling the union representative, "screw you and your fucking union" (pp. 82-83). More of this kind of stuff and less about apparent irrelevancies such as Cuban Lunch and Kids Bids would have made this a better book.

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