

BOOK REVIEW:

NUTRITION POLICY IN CANADA, 1870-1939. PUBLISHED IN 2006 BY UBC PRESS,
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In an era when it sometimes seems that too many people are publishing too many books about the same thing, it's such a relief to find a book that covers a topic no one has come even close to covering. There are, as we know, mountains of books about nutrition, but there are very few books about nutrition policy and almost none about nutrition policy history, in fact, hardly any books that claim to be doing "policy history" in general. Ostry's book is therefore a very welcome piece of work. It is well researched, setting a methodological standard for what a nutrition history should entail, with significant attention to archival materials and early surveys, statistics and texts. My main problem with it is, in fact, my problem, not his: I wish the book were not about Canada.

I realize that this is the usual boorish, US-o-centric response that Canadians are quite used to by now. I also realize that this is an *International* journal, and that I should be happy that the Canadians have their own nutritional policy history when nothing similar exists for the US. But I am, honestly, jealous. I can't help reading the book wondering what the US history would look like.

Because of this jealousy, my response to the book is quite skewed. Like most US Americans, my experience of Canada is of a place strangely familiar and strangely different at the same time. Reading Canadian history makes me feel like I'm in "Bizzaro World." Running out of plot ideas, DC comics created this somewhat different world in which the usual life and people in Superman comics had unusual variations (some good guys were bad guys and vice versa, for example).

Canada is in no way "Bizzaro World." As a matter of fact, if you believe Michael Moore, the US may be the more bizarre country. However, reading as a US researcher who knows a bit about US nutrition policy history, *Nutrition Policy in Canada* is a bit like visiting a world which is so much like your own you are lulled by the sameness, until you realize that everyone has slightly purple eyes. As I read his history, I would find myself looking up US statistics just to make sure things weren't exactly the same. For example, the responsibility for inspecting food for adulteration in Canada moved from the Department of Agriculture to the Department of Health in 1919. When did FDA move to HEW? 1953. Infant mortality rates decline sharply during the Depression. Is this true in the US? Less so, but overall rates had declined the decade before while Canadian rates made a similar decline in the 1930s. Why? Ostry attributes the decline to increased food availability, despite the Depression, due to lowering of food prices. An interesting argument, but why did mortality rates decline so significantly during rising food prices in the US the decade before? Well, I'm not sure I have found the answer to that question, yet.

I'm also not sure why there are such strong differences in epidemiological statistics on nutrition diseases between the US and Canada. Harvey Levenstein's histories of food consumption in America are not strictly histories of nutrition, but they are the closest we have. Levenstein argues that a lot of the "nutrition surveys" in the US overstated malnutrition. There's some indication this was true as well in Canada, for similar reasons: to give ammunition to those who were lobbying for greater government relief payments. However, once again, I was driven to take a quick look at US statistics on nutritional diseases like rickets, and the story is not exactly the same, although it would take me days to figure out comparable statistics to those in Canada, given the differences in reporting.

In other words, I ended up reading this book with the internet by my side, trying, often unsuccessfully, to come up with the comparable statistics and institutional histories in my own country. It was a fascinating, if somewhat frustrating exercise. Of course, Ostry's response to my frustration should be: "Go and write your own nutrition history!" This book is Canadian grown and written for that audience. The US version is a book waiting to happen.

Which brings me to my another question about this fascinating account: to what extent are the differences between the story told about Canadian nutrition policy history and US nutrition policy history differences in fact or in the eye of the storyteller? For example, when looking at the development of dietary standards in the US, I tend to argue that it began with work in the nineteenth century measuring the amount of calories needed to do work, and that this research was part of a larger professional middle-class agenda in opposition to the need for higher wages, despite workers' organized efforts in this area. Ostry argues that, in Canada, national dietary standards emerge decades later from a need to set relief rates during the Depression. Is there no parallel set of nineteenth century middle-class nutrition professionals responding to workers' movements in Canada? Of course, I can't ask Ostry to talk about what isn't there.

Ostry's work on Canadian milk policy also has some specific parallels to my own milk history work. Here again, are his conclusions due to different facts or different interpretations of the facts? For example, using health surveys from the time periods, I argue that breastfeeding declines primarily among middle class women in the United States in the nineteenth century and that it is only in the twentieth century that poor women abandon breastfeeding (DuPuis, 2002)¹. Ostry claims that many poor women in Canada abandoned breastfeeding much earlier. This may be a difference in culture: Ostry notes that many of the poor urban women who did not breastfeed in Canada were French-Canadian. Even in the US, breastfeeding statistics show that French-Canadians were less likely to breastfeed than other mothers. This tendency not to breastfeed is also evident in French statistics from the time. French-Canadian women were also more likely to be poor. In French culture, women were more likely to work full-time outside the house, even in the nineteenth century, than other European cultures. On the other hand, what percentage of total mothers breastfeeding represents a significant drop in breastfeeding? Ostry doesn't give us actual rates of breastfeeding for the periods he discusses, so it is difficult to compare with US breastfeeding rates for that period.

Some differences are in fact differences and are not variations in interpretation. One very interesting difference was the existence in Canada of a national guide to children's nutrition called the *Canadian Mothers' Book*. No equivalent book existed in the US. Why this difference? Only a comparative history could tell.

So, as you can see, this reader kept looking for a comparative history of US and Canadian nutrition she had no right to demand from this author. What Ostry does give us, however, is a wonderful place to start thinking about these comparisons. He gives us an example of how one country went about creating a nutrition policy and how it did and did not work. He also gives us an example of nutrition history as a genre and as method. No matter where you come from, this book will give you ideas about how to think about your own nutrition policy history in your own country.

Work cited:

DuPuis, E. Melanie. 2002. *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became an American Drink*. New York: NYU Press.