

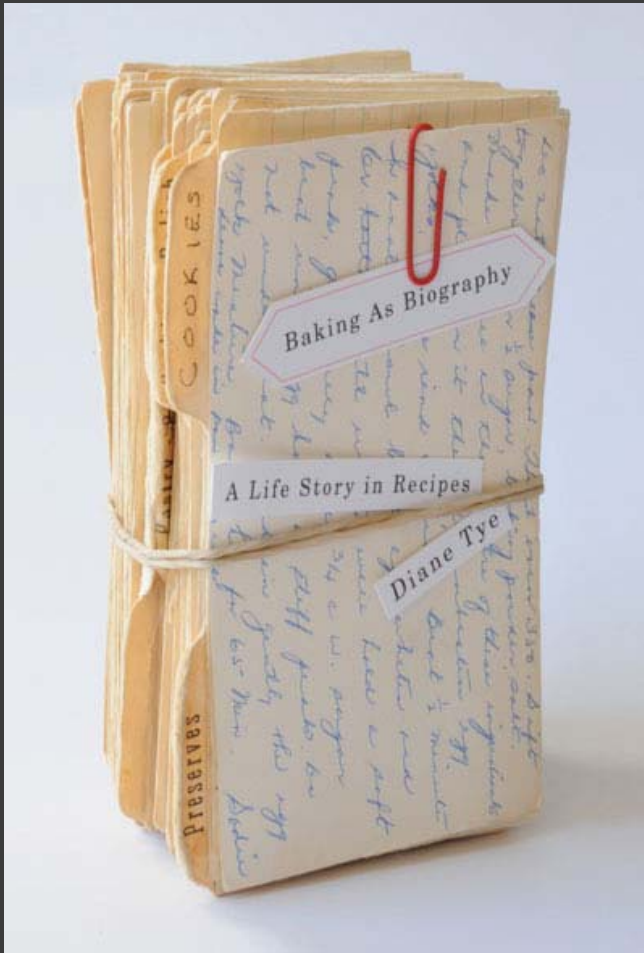
Folk 267: Food and Culture

**DIANE TYE'S**  
***BAKING AS BIOGRAPHY:***  
***A LIFE IN RECIPES***

*Baking as Biography*

# Overview

# Baking as Biography



- Winner of the **Elli Kongas Miranda Prize**  
American Folklore Society, Women's Section (2010)

# *Baking as Biography*

- ① Traces the life history of one woman in terms of her baking
- ① Baking was a central activity, yet not one she either defined herself by, or was significantly recognized for, or found satisfaction from
- ① Her baking was occasioned by and expected from her various social roles: wife, mother, member of her (church) community, wife of the minister

# *Baking as Biography* (cont.)

- The types of baking (what was baked) were also conditioned by these social roles: “comfortable” food for home; “dainty” food for guests
- The networks formed by these social roles became the source for the recipes: she could in turn both pass them along and receive them

# *Baking as Biography* (cont.)

- ⦿ Despite baking (and, oddly, *because* baking) was expected from her, she was able to use it in a subversive way, creating opportunities through it for making time for herself, for friendship, for the creation of a “third place” away from her home roles and her public roles
- ⦿ Her children and her widower find complex meanings from the legacy of her baking

# Chapter 1: A Life in Recipes

# If you've never read an academic monograph before

- ◎ First chapters are sometimes tough, because they
  - Set out the basic context of the work
  - Set out the interpretive lenses through which the author is examining her subject
  - Put the work to follow in the context of previous scholarship
- ◎ The “meat” of the book is alluded to, but rarely present, in the first chapter
  - *But they are good for you, like vegetables*



# A Study of One Woman's Recipes

- ◎ Tye's mother, Laurene (1931-1989), who
  - did not have a strong reputation as a baker,
  - expressly did not enjoy baking,
  - did not take pride in baking, and
  - did not have particularly interesting or distinct recipes.
- ◎ Why should we be interested?

# Baking as obligatory act

- ◎ One of the activities her particular social contexts and particular social roles demanded of her
  - “Because my mother’s baking was obligatory, a response to family and community needs rather than an activity that gave her personal enjoyment, there are subtexts to this collection of recipes that offer insights not only into her life but also into the realities she shared with other women.”

# Laurene:

- ◎ Born in Eureka, Nova Scotia, 1931
  - Mother: Bell, had worked as a nanny in Montreal for a minister who had previously serviced Eureka
  - Father: Fred, descended from a founding family of Pictou County

# Bell and Fred in Eureka

- ◉ Scots Presbyterian ancestry and rural upbringing
- ◉ “Surfaced in foodways, both in terms of the plainness of food [...] and in the way it was categorized.”
  - Basic, unpretentious “grub”
  - Slightly more elevated baked goods “sweet stuff”



# Eureka

- ◎ Formerly an industrial community
  - Former site of mills, blast furnaces, coke ovens, etc.
  - Home of Western Union, Nova Scotia Telephone, two halls, three churches
- ◎ By Laurene's birth, most worked in nearby Trenton (including Fred)

# Henry Tye (b. 1930)

- From New Glasgow
- Meets Laurene in 1947 at church youth camp
- Laurene graduates high school, completes commercial course, works in office of hardware store in New Glasgow
- Marry in 1954 following Henry's BA and divinity degree (United Church ministry)

# 1<sup>st</sup> position: Cape North

- ⦿ Northern Cape Breton
- ⦿ Responsible for three congregations
- ⦿ Very rural posting at the time
- ⦿ Parent's inexperience a theme in their narratives
  - It encapsulates their inability to look after themselves independently and prompts accounts of how readily others came forward to help.
- ⦿ Begins to accrue recipes from local women

## 2<sup>nd</sup> position: Parrsboro

- ⦿ Just after the birth of Diane (1957)
- ⦿ Rural agrarian community with ship-building history
- ⦿ Two congregations
  - Her time in Parrsboro was inextricably linked to the church and its functions. She was involved in both congregations and actively supported women's and youth groups.



## 3<sup>rd</sup> position: Charlottetown, PEI

- ⦿ Suburban as opposed to rural
- ⦿ Younger congregation, closer to her own age
- ⦿ Their lives begin to disentwine
  - Not only church responsibilities but also part-time employment as kindergarten teacher, children, homemaking, social life of the “housewife”
- ⦿ Recipes reflect balance of church and neighborhood networks

## 4<sup>th</sup> position: Sackville / Amherst

- Amherst housed school for the deaf for sister Cathy
- Laurene worked as teacher's assistant, then secretarial work, at the school
- Increasingly independent

# 5<sup>th</sup> position: Charlottetown

- Dies that same year, after ten years with breast cancer

# Lenses for the work to follow

- ◎ Folklore (obviously)
- ◎ Food as “Women’s Caring Work”
  - It is not just that women do more work of feeding, but also that feeding work has become one of the primary ways that women “do” gender. (DeVault)
- ◎ Folklore and Women’s Studies
  - “Coding”
- ◎ Autoethnography
  - Writing about the personal and its relationship to culture

# Chapter 2: Feeding Our Family Well

# Taste of home

- ◎ Specific tastes and textures integrate one into a family's past and present, signaling belonging to a particular family
  - “Like our family itself, the shelves and its contents were reassuringly familiar yet never completely predictable.”
- ◎ Everyday baking reified in memory, less so “special occasion” baking
- ◎ The provision of “good food”

# Biscuits

- ◎ Staple: local term for ‘scone’
- ◎ Laurene’s recipes adapted over time
  - “They read like souvenirs of her childhood home in rural Pictou County and of her journey through Nova Scotia [...]. At the same time, they indicate the centrality of biscuits [...]. [They] remained a core item, but their evolution reflects a shift in preference toward lighter, sweeter baking.”

# Biscuits (cont.)

- ⦿ Biscuits (scones) embody Scottish heritage
- ⦿ Women were judged on the quality of the biscuits they made
- ⦿ Production of biscuits and their daily consumption tied Laurene to the village she grew up in and her Scottish roots
  - Grandmother Bell prepared “cake bread” (biscuit variation), which was out of Laurene’s repertoire by the time of Diane’s childhood
- ⦿ Diane’s memory has lighter and fluffier biscuits, more shortening, baking powder, egg
  - Representing in part a shift in the understanding of the biscuit as part of a meal



# Oatcakes

- Part of Laurene's childhood
- The food most associated with Scottish roots in Pictou County
- Like biscuits, oatcakes "lie at the intersection of cake and bread"
- Henry: considers oatcake "food" not "sweet" or "treat"
  - One ate them to fill up and give energy, not to be enjoyed

# Oatcakes (cont.)

- ⦿ Entered Laurene's active repertoire in Cape Breton
  - "Your mother tried to produce those because simply people might expect to have them when they came into our house, it was normal."
- ⦿ Perhaps, Laurene's daily oatmeal porridge as a child in the 1930s had inured her to the charms of oatcakes
- ⦿ Solution: "Crunky Cookies"
  - Transform heavy oatcake into light, sweet cookie
  - Reconfigure oatcake from "filler" to "treat"

# Filler vs. Treat

- Comprised foods one ate out of necessity
- Most economically made foods
- Primarily for the family
- Comprised foods one ate for pleasure or with some symbolic attachment
- Required fancier ingredients
- What was more likely to be offered to guests

**Filler**

**Treat**

# Molasses-based baking

- “Molasses provides, perhaps more than any other food, a culinary entry-point to cultural dynamics in Atlantic Canada.”
- Consequence of Maritimes – West Indies trade
  - Salt fish, salt beef, lumber in exchange for rum, sugar, molasses
- In early days, molasses incorporated into nearly every meal

# Molasses (cont.)

- ◎ By late 19<sup>th</sup> C., advances in sugar refinement made brown sugar and molasses a “less sophisticated” – i.e. rural and/or working class – food
  - Denigration was intentional move by sugar industry
- ◎ Became more associated with working class households until, even there replaced with refined products
- ◎ Now, has taken on symbolic, nostalgic resonance
  - (In addition to health concerns, influence of counter-cuisines, etc.)

# Conservatism vs. Dynamism

- Laurene adapted recipes to reflect tastes of her family and shifts in general foodscape
- But the function of the foods themselves remained “traditional”
- Their presence in the repertoire was required, expected (by others if not by family), while also being reconceived

# New foods

- ◎ Chocolate-chip cookies
  - Not from her mother, but fit into the tradition of cookies (both in type – the basic dough – and in function – “treat”)
- ◎ Even with new additions, foods rooted the family with rural background and working class food traditions
- ◎ “Domestic activities connected her diachronically and synchronically to other Maritime women.”

# Chapter 3: Church Lunches and Ladies' Teas



# Catering to Tastes

- ① Part of Laurene's domestic agenda was to make food her family, specifically her husband, would like
- ① Based on careful observation of food habits
  - “By taking into account her husband's preferences, a woman accommodates him at the same time as she appears to exercise her own choice.”
- ① Knowledge of preferences reflects the intimacy of their relationship

# “Women’s role”

- ◎ In 1950s, within popular culture and the overarching hegemony, “the economic contributions of a woman to her country through the support of her husband, and most notably her husband,” were extolled
- ◎ Catering of tastes extends to entire family
  - Rejection of foods by family members seen as “disturbing”
- ◎ “Women’s primary responsibility for feeding their families can not easily be translated into either total control or total subservience.”

# Public eye & Invisible work

- ◎ Status in community established through negotiation by that community of an individual's ability to run a household
- ◎ But part of that skill set is that the direct beneficiaries (family) barely notice the effort
  - “Our refusal, or maybe inability, to recognize Mom’s work, meant that we did not acknowledge the food she prepared as a gift.”

# “Minister’s Wife” as Occupation

- Church life focused on a number of overlapping committees
- Provision of food for all meetings and functions a further expectation
- Committee work, community life, and food become inextricable from each other

# “Volunteering”

- ⦿ As Minister’s wife, a heightened expectation for participation
- ⦿ Amount, kind, and quality of food made for church events another way she “did” gender: another mark of her successful womanhood
- ⦿ Church life depends on the work of women’s committees: as organisers, as fundraisers, as (unpaid) caterers, and as providers of uncompensated labour

# *Tested Sweet Recipes*

- ⦿ Community cookbook, produced as fundraiser
- ⦿ Foods differ from the “comfort” foods of home (last class/chapter)
  - “Food should be tidy and contained.”
- ⦿ Ingredients are more refined, more exotic, and more expensive
  - White sugar, citrus, walnuts, etc.

# “Two Atlantic Canadas”

- Recipes demonstrate transition of Maritime Provinces
- One rural and isolated, one urban and integrated
- Cookbook a text for middle-class expression: *daintiness*

# Chapter 4: Baking for a Third Place



# The book takes a twist

- ⦿ In the previous two chapters, much had been made of the expectations of baking placed upon the mid-century wife/mother, and the heightened connotations of being a minister's wife
  - “Catering to tastes”
  - “Women's role”
  - “Invisible work”
  - “Volunteering”
  - Cooking as expression of middle-class status: *daintiness*

# This chapter...

- ◎ Suggests that, within those strictures and expectations, baking can be a form of *resistance and subversion*
- ◎ Premise: within structures of power inequality (here, gender, but the argument can be made for any subjugated group), the subjugated can employ tactics of critique of the dominant power that are not comprehensible to the dominant power

# Coding

## ⦿ Appropriation:

- Adapting to feminist purposes those forms or materials normally associated with male culture or androcentric images of the feminine

## ⦿ Juxtaposition:

- The ironic arrangement of texts, artifacts, or performances

## ⦿ Distraction:

- Strategies that drown out or draw attention away from the subversive power of a message

# Coding (cont.)

- ⦿ Indirection:
  - Indirection or distancing that includes metaphor, impersonation, and hedging
- ⦿ Trivialization:
  - The employment of a form, mode, or genre that the dominant culture considers unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant
- ⦿ Incompetence:
  - Demonstrating incompetence at conventionally feminine activities
    - (from Radner and Lanser 1993)

# Why?

- ⦿ Sometimes, the communication of experience is impossible using the dominant modes
  - Unspeakability
- ⦿ Most of the time, it is because the expressions are “messages critical of some aspect of women’s subordination”
- ⦿ “The essential ambiguity of coded acts protects women from potentially dangerous responses from those who might find their statements disturbing.”

# To make things, um, easier

- Coding can be read into a performance, irrespective of whether the woman specifically intended a coded message
- It is a hermeneutic for interpreting women's acts
  - (This could be a slippery interpretive slope, but I like it nevertheless)
- Again, other groups can code
  - “Ethnic” minorities; LBGT; children

# Food at church meetings

- ◉ Why the (intense) expectation?
- ◉ Food allows the lubricant for sociability (“That’s your chance to get to know them”)
- ◉ Historically, these meetings have not only been for the “service” of the community, but also places of intense social change (suffrage, social justice, etc.)
- ◉ Display of “conventional femininity” through baking, tea, etc. undercuts the potentially radical activities that take place therein

# But, more importantly...

- ⦿ Even when not engaged in “politics,” food extends the meeting time, draws out the time away from home
- ⦿ “Banana Bread and Pineapple Squares were subversive because they helped to carve out precious social time for women.”
- ⦿ Bring together two indulgences: sweets and time away from home
- ⦿ “Baking intended for their enjoyment and not their family’s provisioning became a subservice treat. Time for themselves and with one another was another indulgence.”



# Third Place

- ◎ From Oldenberg:
  - “A generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realm of home and work.”
- ◎ Neutral ground where conversation was the main activity
- ◎ Historically, women excluded from ordered third spaces, so they create their own

# Carving out time for themselves

- ◎ “Coffee” as a social act
  - Whether drop in or scheduled
- ◎ Communities of choice
  - From a larger network of obligation, she chose (women choose) networks of voluntary associations
- ◎ The rise of using convenience foods
  - Graham crackers, Dream Whip, Jello, pudding mixes, cake mixes, etc.
- ◎ The skill set for rapid production

# Chapter 5: Tasting the Past

# The legacy of Laurene's baking

- In jeopardy
- In part, store-bought treats far more normative than homemade
  - Widespread availability, shift in connotations of store-bought, and expectations of female labour to no longer be restricted to the domestic sphere
- But far more a consequence of individual responses to the legacy of family dynamics
- Food a form of memory, and an aid to remembering

# Diane (elder daughter)

- Selective reproduction of mother's repertoire
- A form of nostalgia and personal commemoration
- Not for entertaining but for family, especially extended family get-togethers
  - The food we share is a physical reminder that she lives in us and continues to be a part of the family.

# Diane (cont.)

- ⦿ Making “tasty” food a continuation of role inherited from mother, how family sees her and how she sees herself
- ⦿ A “natural” inheritance as elder daughter: partial claim of mother’s authority
  - Given role? Or taken?
- ⦿ For *herself*
  - Above all, making my mother’s food is an act of self-nurturing. Tasting a cookie, I am a child again watching my mother bake.

# Henry (husband/father)

- ⦿ Given proclaimed low priority for food, does not reproduce wife's cooking/baking
- ⦿ Does continue their shared practice of making strawberry jam in June
- ⦿ Makes modification of pumpkin pie from Jack O'Lantern (using premade crusts)
- ⦿ For Henry, the absence of food is very much the absence of structure, of the rhythms of the day, week, seasons, year
- ⦿ Partial reproduction of Laurene's cooking (and continuation of food scheduling) helps to assuage that absence

# Mark (brother, son)

- Reproduces none of the tastes: does not bake
- Like Henry, food memories more often associated with the kind of consumption (restaurants) than with specific foods
- Demonstrates “familialist ideology that holds women accountable for their families’ happiness.”



# Cathy (second daughter, middle child, deaf child)

- ◎ Memories of childhood more complex
  - Sense of exclusion by culture of the primacy of orality in family communications
- ◎ Husband expected reproduction of his mother's food
- ◎ Food choice a recognised site of contestation in families
- ◎ For the most part, Cathy chooses not to remember

# Dilemma

- ⦿ How does one commemorate the life of a beloved ancestor through reproduction of her creative food making without invoking a nostalgia for the conditions that created the context for those foods?
- ⦿ Echoes through the entire course when one speaks of “folk foods” ethnic foods, traditional foods, often born from want and oppression