The Work of Her Hands: A Prairie Woman’s Life in Remembrances and Recipes
by Plynn Gutman
Hamilton, ON: Poplar Press (a division of Wolsak and Wynn), 2010,
Advance reading copy

Reviewed by Andrea Belcham

In The Work of Her Hands, Plynn Gutman pays homage to her grandmother, Marie-Anne Lacaille, whose “serpentine” life (167) spanned almost a century. For Gutman’s and her mother’s generations, Lacaille represents both generosity and frugality – a woman who, though struggling like any other Prairie farmwife to raise a family during the Depression, managed to keep her children well fed with homegrown foods. Even in her nineties, living alone in a tiny urban apartment, Lacaille could always be depended on to entertain her guests in sweet style, with mile-high meringue pies and homey spice cakes. Gutman preserves the legends of her elder’s accomplishments, but she also pulls at the loose threads: how did her grandmother feel about marrying for practicality, after the death of her first beau? What secret guilt haunted her as she watched her disabled son struggle against his father’s will? And what was the source of the depression that finally caught up with her in her later years, when the family farm was long sold and her husband buried, her children and grandchildren grown – when her hands were idle and her mind free to wander? To find the answers, Gutman pieces together Lacaille’s biography using family reminiscences, filling in the gaps with her own empathetic – and self-acknowledged – imaginings. Because Gramma was known as the great provider, the woman who could make “something wonderfully delicious out of almost nothing” (13), Gutman chooses food as the constant around which to structure her narrative.

Eight-year-old Marie-Anne Fradette came to Radville in southern Saskatchewan from Quebec with her family in 1911. Marie-Anne and her sister, Audelie, received formal education for only a few years before being withdrawn by their parents to help out on the farm. The two were comrades-in-arms – against the patriarchal structure of their home life and the prejudices of the local farmers, who referred to the Fradettes and other French-
Canadian settlers as “pea-soupers.” So when Audelie accepted her beau’s marriage proposal, she convinced Marie-Anne to accept his brother’s as a means for them to establish homes of their own. Isaie Lacaille was a reluctant farmer, however, and Marie-Anne faced years of hard work toiling alongside her husband in the fields as well as keeping house. Yet the meals she prepared demonstrate her consistent ingenuity during lean times – filling dishes like tranché (sliced potatoes fried in butter over a coal stove), grandpère et grandmère (meat stew with dumplings), mashed potato pie, and always a sweet something (chocolate soup, twisted bread doughnuts, Christmas pudding with butter sauce) to soften the hard edges of farm life. She sold eggs and butter to a local grocer to help keep her family afloat, canned meat and linked blood sausage, kept her own little axe for beheading chickens. The heart of her work beat in the kitchen, but her heart, her children knew, was beating for them: “there was nothing she wouldn’t do for us,” recalls the author’s Aunt Helen;

…Dad… well, he just seemed to be in his own little world, he’d go off into the fields or wherever he went and we wouldn’t see him all day, but Mom she was always there… (115)

Lacaille’s dishes – simple, lovingly prepared – were so representative of the attention she devoted to raising her children that her recipes have become comfort food for her descendants. Gutman ends each chapter with a small collection of recipes in theme with the narrative. The codification of Lacaille’s culinary creations was a challenge for the author, who was aided in the task by her memory and her mother’s – not by Lacaille’s hand, it turns out, as she cooked by instinct. Gutman describes how on one occasion, three of Lacaille’s granddaughters sat before their grandmother as she prepared tourtière, each of them scrambling to record Lacaille’s vague measurements and quick methods; despite comparing notes afterwards to repair any omissions, none could replicate the dish at home. Most of the recipes offered by Gutman are accessible to today’s cook, with a few exceptions (headcheese, for instance, which calls for one head and four hocks from a freshly butchered pig). Indeed, the ingredient lists and instructions are quite spare. Doubtless Gutman feels somewhat dissatisfied by the results – that it’s between the lines where her grandmother, with her particular idiosyncrasies and knowledge, cooks. Still, the tangible final dishes are a means for the author to honour Gramma: “When I prepare and taste them,” she states, “I revisit my grandmother’s life and can relate more deeply to the comfort and rhythm, the courage and even the despair of her experiences” (20).
Gutman most vividly captures Lacaille’s time as farmer, when her grandmother’s days were indeed rhythmic, and her role was assured. When addressing the stage when Lacaille and her husband left the farm, though, and began a long nomadic period moving between relative’s homes and other temporary shelters, Gutman presents a Lacaille who is a more elusive literary character. Isaie died at the age of 65; Marie-Anne lived for another three decades as a widow, yet this stretch of time is only touched on by Gutman. And understandably so, for Lacaille was no longer surrounded by family members who could bear testimony to her habits. As a young adult, the author lived for a time near her grandmother on the West Coast; they were united as “single” women and by the ritual of Lacaille setting out elaborate, home-cooked meals for her visiting granddaughter. Only retrospectively can Gutman appreciate the opportunity she had during this brief period to question her grandmother about the past. Now she must read between the lines again, trying to discover her relative’s hidden self through her own imagination. Here, she interprets her grandmother’s reaction to a strife-filled day long ago:

The day’s events would have sidled through her mind all that night and into the next morning: as she milked the cows and separated the milk; while she worked and squeezed the butter, and pressed it into molds; and as she made her bread, pouring the warm milk and yeast mixture into the hole she made in the bowl of flour… The metal bowl scraped and clunked an iambic tune as she pushed and turned, pushed and turned, moving the dough, moving the thoughts in her mind. (118)

These “thoughts in her mind” would be too much in the last years of her life, when her nights became infiltrated by visions of a man blowing his “hot air” onto her (171). Yet during the day, Gutman remembers, her grandmother would keep up a brave and chipper front. Lacaille’s hidden sorrows were difficult for her family to define. What was certain, in Gutman’s account, was the love she had for her children and grandchildren, and how she communicated that love through food. *The Work of Her Hands* is as much Gutman’s journey as it is Lacaille’s story, with the author trying to understand through memories – hers and others’ – a woman who is no longer around to tell her story herself.
Andrea Belcham is the author of the forthcoming *Food and Fellowship: Projects and Recipes to Feed a Community* (The Alternate Press).