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Environmental and economic historian Brian Payne’s book *Eating the Ocean: Seafood and Consumer Culture in Canada* starts and ends in the same manner: by referencing Evelyn Spencer, the so-called Fish Evangelist.[1] Spencer became the face of governmental campaigns within Canada, touring the country in the 1930s, educating Canadian housewives on how to turn fish into delicious and wholesome meals and improving their limited knowledge of the benefits of a fish-focused diet.[2] But, as Payne suggests, Spencer was probably aware that her campaign would not yield impressive results in increasing fish consumption among the Canadian population. The reason was straightforward: Canadian fish was quite unpalatable and even the most aggressive and well-organized promotional campaign would not miraculously transform it into an appetizing food staple. At the center of Payne’s thesis lies the contention that while it was evident that consumer demand for fish and seafood was dwindling among Canadians, fish industrialists and governmental officials jointly miscalculated market conditions and stubbornly ignored other pitfalls on the production side of the sector, effectively turning Canadian fisheries into the single most mismanaged industry throughout the 1900s-50s period.

This is an extensively researched book that seeks—and to a large extent succeeds—to contribute to an already crowded scholarly discussion on Canadian fisheries by reminding readers that fish is at its core a food product. Payne stresses that we should not neglect to analytically approach it through the lens of the history of food consumerism, as well as historiographies of food health and nutrition.

The time frame for Payne’s study commences roughly in the early 1920s when aggressive marketing to raise fish popularity was first launched by both industry and bureaucratic stakeholders. It then follows these efforts well through the rest of the 1920s and 1930s when advertising became even more systematic and sophisticated. It rounds up in the 1950s when the ills of decades-long mis-
management and false market assessments in the Canadian fisheries finally came to light and the need to consolidate rigorous quality controls on the production chain of the fisheries was acknowledged.

The book comprises five chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of the wider discussion on Canadian fisheries promotion schemes, their rationale, and their eventual mishandling, plus an introduction and concluding remarks. It is an overarching principle of the book that "politics and economics warped proper assessment of consumer demand for fish" (p. 17). The first chapter provides the economic and political background of Canada's fisheries industry at the dawn of the twentieth century, within the larger context of the development of the modern state and the reimagining of economic nationalism. Payne follows the trail of state-subsidized marketing of seafood from the early twentieth century to World War I. He argues that the war was the perfect alibi for the bureaucrats (Department of Marine and Fisheries) and fish industry cooperatives (Canadian Fisheries Association) to launch food rationing propaganda to replace meat with fish, "an essential component of 'the patriotic consumer's diet,'" in order to "cons-serve meat and provide value to the home economy" (pp. 38, 37). The fishermen’s struggles had to be rewarded amid a widespread sentiment that the areas of Atlantic Canada and their adjacent fisheries experienced a serious recession, sidelined by Ottawa's federal administration.

The efforts of fisheries bureaucrats and industrialists to capitalize on the healthy diet fad that kicked off the previous century, by promoting seafood as the epitome of wholesome food, are covered in chapter 2. As Payne showcases, the campaigns were not restricted to advocating for the benefits of fish consumption for individual health but went further in labeling eating more fish as the patriotically proper thing to do in times of war or other malnourishment crises. Payne highlights the shift in advertising tropes and meth-ods: from generalized and vague references to fish’s health potential to more scientifically grounded claims on fish’s immense nutritional value. The advertising campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, Payne demonstrates, primarily and not unexpect-edly targeted the Canadian housewife. They sought to reverse hitherto entrenched opinions of seafood as a low-quality product and placed children’s health at the epicenter of the nutritional discourse. Payne further delineates the environmental nuances appearing in the fish propaganda of the period, a “larger celebratory rhetoric of Canada’s northern culture” with advertisements declaring that food products were extracted from the pristine cool depths of Canadian seas (p. 63). “Nationalism and nature were thus deeply inter-woven” in marketing Canadian seafood, Payne concludes (p. 64).

In chapter 3, Payne expands on the previous section, maintaining that fish propaganda did not simply attempt to recast fish as the ultimate modern and wholesome food but also set out to establish an improved and refined version of the main fish consumer, that of the white middle-class Canadian housewife, well-versed in home economics, who consciously chose domestically sourced fish products. A large-scale educational campaign in the press was launched to enlighten housewives on how to choose and prepare varied and tasteful fish meals for the whole family; it was their ignorance on how to do so that stained public opinion about the nutritional value and deliciousness of fish, straining an economy of national importance. Anchored by both gender and class stereotypes, fish marketing essentially put the burden entirely on women to revive the flailing sector. And even if the messaging was seemingly powerful, the results were modest as long as the main issue hindering fish sales, that of the low quality of the end product, was still not addressed.

Chapter 4 takes us to the interwar period. Fish industrialists and bureaucrats, as Payne demonstrates, continued to shockingly underplay the
flaws in the production end of the fisheries. Payne here turns to the fishermen themselves and provides a welcoming background on the trawler debate (the feuding between trawlers and line fishermen). He demonstrates that they were the ones truly aware of the sector’s economic and managerial needs. During this period, the promotional campaigns to increase consumption reached their most generously funded phase, with extensive use of radio, external consultations, and a series of surveys to assess consumer preferences. “That unquestioned faith in advertising as the single solution to the economic woes of the fisheries never seems to have subsided,” Payne notes (p. 129). The political context was favorable as well with the return to leadership of the Liberal Party in 1935 and the Canadian Fisheries Association successfully lobbying for a “sea of change” in governmental funding (p. 42). The campaign still centered on patriotic grounds but was now supplemented with social undertones: the imperative was to consume more fish to alleviate the poor living conditions of Canadian fishermen.

In the concluding chapter, tellingly titled “Fish Will Win the War,” we move forward to the early 1950s. The war years, Payne illustrates, proved particularly lucrative for the processed fish industry whereas the rest of the fish subsectors had to depend exclusively on government purchases destined for foreign aid. Similar to World War I, Payne asserts, World War II was an excellent opportunity to promote fish consumption: to ensure readiness at the war front by boosting masculinity levels, support national economy, prevent food shortages, and contribute to the Allies’ victory by reserving meat for the troops. The rhetoric was carried over in the postwar years, adjusted to the new global realities and challenges and heavily influenced by axioms in line with US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “freedom from want.” As international food relief programs shaped the world food order, both the Canadian Fisheries Association and the Department of Fisheries sought to secure a spot for Canadian fisheries in the global food market. It was only then that, at last, Payne concludes, the Department of Fisheries assumed its role as “a consumer protection agency” determined to shift the overall public image of fish products (p. 186). At the same time, both industry and governmental circles finally came to terms with the inherent flaws of production, from extraction to retailing, and began to push for changes in production over consumption.

The chapters in this book seamlessly blend into each other, making for a coherent whole, and Payne makes good use of his extensive array of sources. The narrative is laid out in an absorbing way as Payne takes great care to assign agency and voice to a vast set of actors, involved more or less directly in the fisheries business. Administrative clerks, politicians, fishermen, fish and seafood industrialists, food scientists, Canadian housewives, cooks, and media personalities engage in a vivid interplay, and Payne painstakingly resuscitates memorable episodes conveying their frictions, strategizing, and aspirations. The book is further accompanied by sizable primary promotional material and other ephemera. It is well referenced (especially the bibliography of commodities histories), even though more scholarly works on the interrelation of food and public health policies and food as an element of national heritage would have been appreciated.

Even if at times, and due to the overlapping themes of the chapters, there is some repetition, the book successfully broadens the canonical corpus of Canadian fisheries historiography with its energetically written tale of the string of fish marketing fiascos. This study will surely find an audience outside the fisheries history specialization. It makes for an engaging reading for students and scholars of environmental, economic, and food and nutrition history, and gender and media studies, as well as those generally interested in the history of consumerism.

Notes
[1]. The book is part of the Louis J. Robichaud scholarly publications on Canadian public policies and regionalism. The series is a collaboration between the Donald J. Savoie Institute and McGill-Queen's University Press.

[2]. Spencer, before embarking on the fish campaign on her native Canada, had already acquired a sort of “celebrity chef” status at the time as she had previously participated in a similar campaign initiated by the US Bureau of Fisheries. Starting in 1915, she led a successful campaign to promote fish consumption among American audiences who flocked to her fish cooking demonstrations.


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