

DECONSTRUCTING DONUTS

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Enid Slack

The budgetary tango

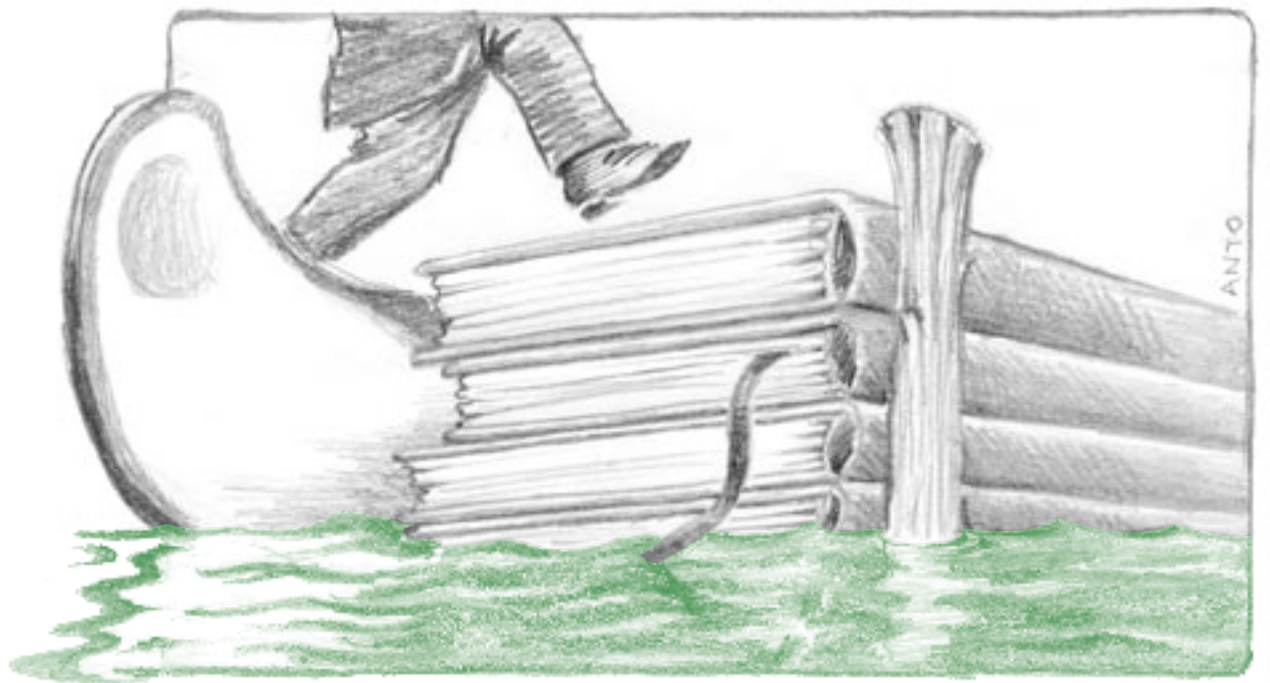
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Erratum

In the March issue, the publisher of Natalee Caple's *Mackerel Sky* should have been listed as Thomas Allen.

In Memoriam Val Ross 1950–2008

The LRC mourns the premature loss of one of Canada's finest literary journalists and a dear friend.

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Standing on Guard for Tim's

Just how much of the national identity burden should a pastry have to bear?

DAVID DUNNE

The Donut: A Canadian History

Steve Penfold

University of Toronto Press

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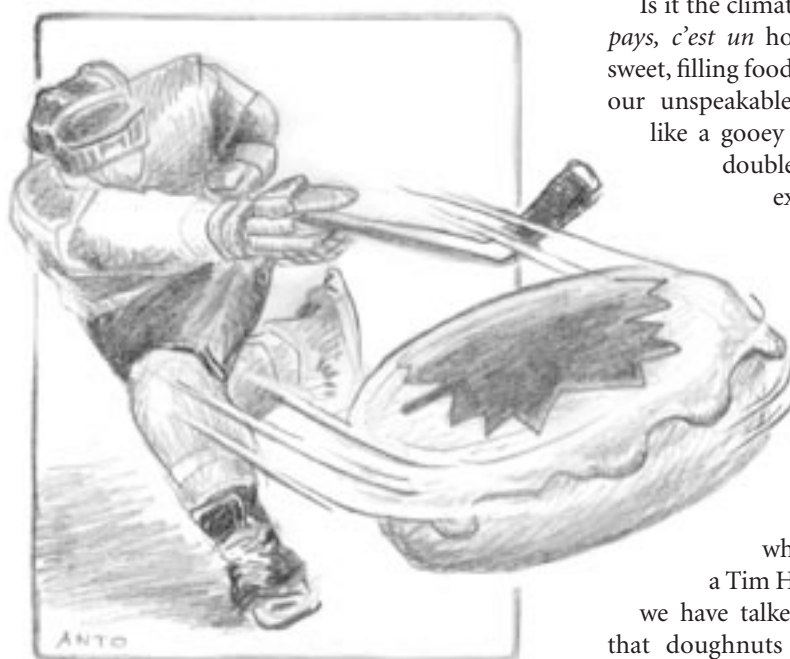
You can bet a dollar to a doughnut that heaven is round with a hole in the middle. Just like the doughnut itself: fragrant, warm and deeply satisfying. The snack of chubby cherubs. Chocolate almond biscotti? Light and crunchy, yes, but where is that stick-to-your-ribs, contentedly full feeling? Doughnuts are comfort food *par excellence*. But, according to Steve Penfold, the doughnut is much more: it is a cultural symbol and a bellwether of Canadian social development. Really.

As a marketer, I can believe this. There are two tribes in the world: Tim's people and Starbucks people. Tim's (a.k.a. Tim Hortons) people (a.k.a. doughnut lovers) are earthy, honest, hardworking. Give them a double double over a decaf grande vanilla soy latte any day. They like their snacks big, sweet, cheap and filling. They work with their hands and earn every penny. They talk about hockey, not postmodernism. They are essential Canadians, the bedrock of the Canadian shield.

Starbucks people? Yuppies. Pretentious advertising executives who wouldn't allow anything without a fancy Italian name past their oh-so-glossy lips.

At one time, Canadians might have defined themselves as Catholic or Protestant; now, we define ourselves by the brands we eat, drive, sleep on and work with. Brands define the tribe you belong to. Suggest to an Apple person that a PC might have its advantages and you are courting a condescending, designerly sniff. When doughnut lovers scoff their favourite confection they are making a statement of belonging—just as when Harley-Davidson owners tattoo the logo on various parts of their bodies, they are making a lifelong commitment to their clan.

There is a political element to this analysis as well as a marketing one. Doughnuts are food for



the proles, the quiet rebels against the insidious nannies who lecture us about cholesterol, body mass and spending hours on the treadmill and the smug urbanites who think nothing of shelling out three dollars for a cup of bitter tar the size of a thimble. If a revolution were to happen in Canada, it would be planned in a doughnut shop, not a Starbucks.

For Penfold, the doughnut is the essence of Canada and is interwoven with its social history. Nevertheless, as he makes clear, the Canadian-ness of doughnuts is a myth. These confections are no more Canadian than Fred Flintstone or Homer Simpson, whose loyalty to the doughnut is unquestioned: Homer once dreamily sighed "Ah, doughnuts. Is there anything they can't do?" They weren't invented here, and that Canadian icon Tim Hortons has been owned by an American fast-food chain for over a decade.

Yet somehow we have adopted them as our own; indeed, Penfold reports that several small towns vie for the title "Doughnut Capital of Canada," as they do for "Hockey Capital" or "Moose Capital," "Goose Capital" or whatever. Like most things Canadian, the fact that they are a regional phenomenon—they do not have much cultural status in Quebec or British Columbia, for instance—does not seem to matter. We eat more of them than anyone else: Canadian per capita doughnut consumption is the highest in the world. What is it about the humble doughnut that makes us feel more Canadian?

Is it the climate? *Mon pays, ce n'est pas un pays, c'est un* honey-glazed. We need rich, sweet, filling food to bolster ourselves against our unspeakable winters. There's nothing like a gooey Boston cream and a large double double to give you that extra layer of padding when you have to take the kids to hockey at 5:30 a.m.

Or could it be the advertising? After decades of feel-good ads about old ladies struggling on their walkers through blizzards to Tim's, or students in far-flung places who are transported home by a Tim Hortons coffee mug, perhaps we have talked ourselves into the myth that doughnuts are essentially Canadian. But when Tim Hortons starts showing up in Kandahar to give the troops a taste of home, isn't it all going a bit far? Have we now convinced ourselves that the doughnut is our secret weapon against the Taliban?

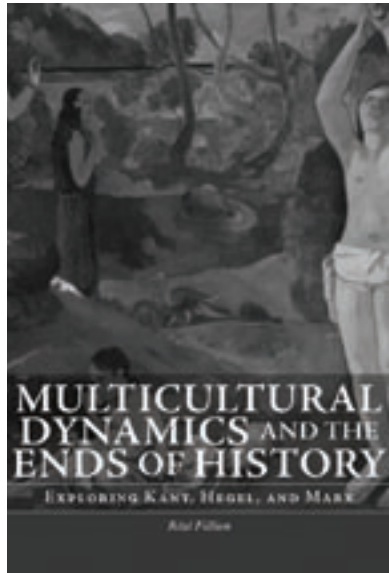
For the author of this book, it is the ordinariness, the everydayness, of doughnuts that makes them so fascinating. Doughnuts are, in academic jargon, meta-mundane: so boring they are of interest. Because they are ordinary, studying them can reveal patterns that we might otherwise overlook.

Penfold, as you can imagine, is thoroughly sick of doughnuts. They were the subject of his PhD thesis, and he spent ten years heroically scoffing more of them than any human being (perhaps with the exception of Homer Simpson, if you count him as human) should ever have to.

His goal in this book is nothing less than to capture the essence of Canada's social history in a doughnut. The cheap confection is really a vehicle for discussing other things, like the growth of efficient manufacturing, the development of consumer culture, the emergence of brand mythology. There is no questioning Penfold's ambition: this is quite an agenda for the humble doughnut. With the same determination he must have needed to work his way through all those chocolate dips, maple-glazed and crullers, he takes a big bite of consumer culture, chews it thoroughly and spits it out. The doughnut, he declares, is emblematic of a consumption ethic in North American society: eaten purely for pleasure, not for sustenance, it represents the

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triumph of gratification over thrift and of desire over need.

For an amateur anthropologist and an espresso aficionado such as myself, this was a compelling idea. So compelling, in fact, that I felt obliged to pay a visit to my local Coffee Time to see what the fuss was about. Research can be tough.

Trying to look nonchalant, I approached the counter and asked the young Filipino attendant for a coffee. Regular? Stumped, but knowing enough not to blurt out “non-fat Americano misto with a touch of foam,” I mumbled something about milk. That seemed to satisfy, and before I could say, “no sugar, please,” I was presented with a pre-sugared, pale liquid in a paper cup.

Now came the tricky part: ordering a doughnut. Which kind? I never knew there were so many. Perhaps a plain one: surely that would give me the most authentic, if mundane, experience. Or one covered in sugar or chocolate? The ones with sprinkles seemed to be for young children; then there were the filled ones, but without a hole, could they really be considered doughnuts? As I mused all this, the young attendant gazed at me with increasing impatience. With each second of uncertainty I revealed my secret identity as a member of the other tribe and probably a spy. Who else would not know what kind of doughnut he likes?

Flustered, I blew my cover by asking which was the most popular doughnut. That would be Boston cream. All right, one Boston cream, then. Fully outed, I took my Boston cream, paid (although it felt like a foreign country, at least they accepted my money) and retreated to a corner to sip, munch and watch.

Penfold was right. This was meta-mundane. No low lights, soft seating or cool jazz; just a few people seated at melamine-topped tables, staring vacantly into space. A couple of middle-aged women sat in a corner, apparently planning a community meeting: perhaps they were plotting a coup, a hint of the doughnut shop as a hotbed of political activism? But it sounded more like a bake sale.

I took out Penfold's book and continued my reading. With commendable thoroughness, he proceeds to tell us everything we could ever want to know, and a good deal more besides, about the rise of the modern doughnut, from after the Second World War to the turn of the century. (He misses out, though, on the actual invention of the doughnut, which is somewhat dubiously claimed by Hanson Gregory in 1847; according to one version, Gregory was an American ship's captain who impaled a sweet bun on the ship's steering column; in another, he was visited by an angel who told him to end the suffering of his people by making pastries with holes so they would cook through.)

Penfold's interest is in the commercialization of the doughnut rather than its invention. His account begins with the story of Ernest Atalick, a baker from Port Colborne, Ontario, who returned from the Second World War to find his family bakery deeply in debt. Clever Ernest suggested doughnuts, and before long they were selling like hot cakes. The Homestead Bakery became Homestead Donuts, shipping the stodgy snacks across southwestern Ontario. Clearly, doughnuts had filled a hole in the Canadian food landscape.

Following the success of doughnuts in retail stores came the emergence of the doughnut shop. In 1961 two American chains, Mister Donut and Dunkin' Donuts, set up shop in Ontario and Quebec, shortly followed by Canadian versions, Tim Hortons and Country Style. As cities and towns expanded, doughnut shops provided sustenance, or at least pleasure, to the new suburbanites. They reflected the values of their time—and the tensions too, as hippies and other disreputables were sometimes refused entry. In the vanguard of franchising, they led the democratization of business so that the small guy could run his own doughnut shop.

And so the doughnut grew in influence, colonizing the Canadian food landscape as the chains expanded through franchising. In bad economic times, doughnuts were cheap enough to remain a viable treat even for the economically challenged, and downsized middle managers took on franchises. The doughnut's resilience to economic downturn was perhaps the root of its mythology as the working-class treat.

For Tim Hortons, the link with Canada's national game was too good a marketing story to resist. The chain's advertising reinforced the myth with nostalgic allusions to a Canada that perhaps never existed but was alive in the national imagination, a Rockwell-esque Canada of English-speaking, cozy communities that warmed their hearts around a coffee mug.

For most of us, it is difficult to imagine writing one's thesis on doughnuts. Who knew that there could be so much truth in a doughy snack? Penfold has done a commendable research job. The book is generously sprinkled with data, rolled in factoids, dipped in anecdotes.

Yet for all its richness, Penfold's doughnut is a tough chew. An ambitious undertaking to begin with, *The Donut* makes its point—that doughnuts occupy a central place in modern consumer culture—by overwhelming the reader with too many details and turgid, if admittedly clear, prose. Its linear chronological structure, for example, could have been replaced by a narrative focus on the compelling stories of individuals, communities and families. There is a story here, to be sure, but *The Donut* imprisons rather than liberates it.

It is difficult to blame Penfold for this: clearly, he has done honest work and deserves his PhD. Yet if he wanted to publish a mass-market book, his editors did him a disservice by failing to help him bring out the essence of his narrative. *The Donut* is wonderful source material for a book that has yet to be written, but falls short of being the definitive story it evidently aspires to be. At its conclusion (and yes, like a good thesis, *The Donut* has a “Conclusions” section), one is left full but dissatisfied, as one might after one too many honey-dipped. ☐

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