

'How to Keep a Husband on Packaged Foods' and Other Lessons: Gendered Education in the Canadian National Exhibition's Women's Division during the Kate Aitken Era, 1920s-1950s [1]

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Abstract

Kate Aitken (1891-1971), perhaps best known as a broadcasting pioneer in Canadian history, was the first director of "Women's Activities" at the Women's Division of the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE) in Toronto. It was a position she officially took on in 1938 until her retirement in 1952. Aitken's kitchen demonstration development, and her overwhelming success as an educator at the CNE offers a lens through which to examine the gendered education of food preparation, at a time when what constituted as 'women's work' was itself being re-worked.

This paper will investigate women's programming at the CNE, and how it helped to support and construct women's accepted roles as part of a wider discourse about

women's place both within and outside the home. Food played an intensely important part in this process. While the pedagogical purpose of many of the activities at the Women's Building were described as the "capture, care and feeding of husbands," Aitken's use of food programming fulfilled multiple functions: as a tool for community organizing in her massive 'ladies luncheons' and her work with Women's Institutes; as a gendered pedagogy in her restaurants, table-setting and cooking demonstrations and competitions; and as a means of teaching children and young people the skill of feeding themselves. As a woman whose work sat at the intersection of the 'modern' and the 'traditional' kitchen she also communicated important messages about shifting gender roles in the early to mid-twentieth century in Canada.

Résumé

Comment fidéliser son mari et autres leçons : les produits alimentaires, le rôle des genres, et la division des femmes à l'Exposition canadienne nationale (ENC) à l'époque de Kate Aitken (1920 à 1950)

Kate Aitken (1891 à 1971), une journaliste canadienne de renom, fut la première directrice du volet 'activités pour les femmes' lors de l'Exposition canadienne nationale à Toronto. Elle a accepté le poste en 1938 et l'a occupé jusqu'en 1952, au moment de sa retraite. Les démonstrations culinaires de Mme Aitken à l'ECN ont connu un franc succès et sont méritoires d'analyses plus poussées. Plus précisément, nous argumentons que ces démonstrations ont contribué de manière significative à l'établissement des rôles des genres, notamment en lien avec les activités liées à la cuisine, et ce, à un moment où le rôle plus large des femmes au sein de la société se redéfinissait.

Cet article examine le programme de l'ECN destiné aux femmes et comment celui-ci a contribué à l'établissement de discours sur les rôles et comportements acceptables pour les femmes à domicile et à l'extérieur. La nourriture et la cuisine ont grandement contribué dans la construction de ces discours. Même si le but premier des activités proposées aux femmes dans le cadre de l'ECN était de 'trouver, marier et fidéliser' un mari, les démonstrations d'Aitken proposaient une vocation plus élargie : la cuisine était un moyen de rassembler, d'aider les organismes pour les femmes, d'offrir une formation en restauration, d'enseigner les jeunes à cuisiner et à subsister à leurs besoins, etc. Le travail de Mme Aitken se trouvait au carrefour du traditionalisme et de la modernité; on lui doit énormément pour le rôle qu'elle a joué dans la diffusion de messages importants portant sur l'évolution des rôles traditionnels au cours de la première moitié du 20^e siècle au Canada.

Other Articles From This Issue

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