

## Book Review – “Maple Syrup: A Short History of Canada’s Sweetest Obsession” by Peter Kuitenbrouwer

By Matthew M. Thomas

**T**oronto-based journalist, opinion columnist, forester, and hobbyist syrup maker, Peter Kuitenbrouwer and publisher Doubleday Canada have given the world the latest book to trace the culture and importance of the maple syrup industry. Unlike other popular books that were more focused on maple sugaring in the United States, such as the 1993 book *Sweet Maple: Life, lore & recipes from the sugarbush*, or *Maple Sugarin’ in Vermont: A Sweet History* from 2008, this book is specifically focused on the culture and events that surround maple syrup making in Canada. Considering the author is fluent in French and the focus of the book is largely French speaking Quebec; it is surprising that the book was and not also published in French.

The book *Maple Syrup* is a work of popular non-fiction, primarily targeted to a general audience. Publication of a book of this format and focus was long overdue. Fans of maple history, especially in the U.S. corners of the maple world, will agree that this book fills a gaping hole in English language publications documenting and explaining the modern story of the maple syrup industry in Canada, particularly, Québec. The book covers a lot of ground in this book, at times resulting in explanations and analyses that are at times a little thin. However, to his defense, maple history in Canada as a topic is pretty

broad, so the narrative is understandably a bit streamlined at times.

Kuitenbrouwer is a good writer and his narration flows well and is easy to read as he links the theme of one chapter to the next. The book begins with an introduction followed by the requisite chapter explaining maple tree physiology and the science of sap flow and syrup making. Excluding the introduction and chapter on the natural history and science of sugaring, the beginning four of the fifteen chapters address what I would describe as historical topics, covering events from the mid-twentieth century or before. The remaining chapters primarily look at important maple industry events and themes over the last three decades. Included in those more recent decades, a good portion of the text is heavily autobiographical, tracing the author’s journey of discovery and identity related to maple syrup, stretching from his childhood memories in the sugarbush up to his trials and tribulations as a greenhorn syrup maker.

The largest and perhaps most thought provoking of the chapters examines the history and importance of maple sugaring in the First Nations communities with a notable emphasis on recounting Native people’s losses of land, culture, and identity at the hands of European colonists and settlers. Kuitenbrouwer,

details in this chapter, that despite the tragic history of Native peoples in North America, maple syrup making continues to have traditional and economic importance in their communities, and Native peoples are to be thanked for bringing this great food to the world. Maple sugaring as a family focused activity on the farms and homestead of 19th century colonial and settler families are detailed in the next chapter followed by a look at the role of family and church in 20th century sugaring in Québec.

As the author of the book *Maple King*, I was happy and surprised to see a chapter title "The Rise and Fall of the Maple King" tracing the interconnections between the early 20th century story of Vermont-based maple sugar mogul George C. Cary and the more pertinent Canadian story of the formation of the Québec maple syrup producer's cooperative by Cyrille Vaillancourt in 1924. Unfortunately, the author falls into the trap of uncritically repeating a story line promulgated by Vaillancourt and his biographer, over-emphasizing the role of the formation and early success of the cooperative in the failure of the Cary Maple Sugar Company.

As noted above, the book has a large scope and of course cannot explore every interesting topic in Canadian maple history. After all, the subtitle does begin with a "A Short History." Nevertheless, as one devoted to the topic of maple history I would like to have seen more coverage of the development of the commercial Canadian maple syrup industry in the late 19th and early 20th

centuries, including the important place of syrup buyers and packers to industry success. Likewise, missing was the role of technological innovation and the manufacturing of maple production equipment in the growth and evolution of the industry, including the important contribution of Canadian scientists and manufacturers in the application and development of reverse osmosis for the maple syrup industry.

Kuitenbrouwer's journalist background and style really come out in the chapters covering the more recent events in Canadian maple world. In these chapters he interweaves descriptions of site visits with interview quotes to give the story life and personality. Consistent with his past writing as an opinion columnist, Kuitenbrouwer takes strong positions on many of the topics in the book, regularly defaulting to take the position of the perceived underdog in his narratives while showing a certain distrust and contempt for government involvement and the industrial side of the industry.

It is particularly ironic that the book's cover design features a nostalgic sugarbush scene in red, blue, white, and black, the color scheme and imagery reminiscent of the infamous and iconic Quebec round syrup can. Yet the book makes no mention of the history or importance of this iconic image or Canada's role in the history and evolution of maple syrup packaging and consumer sales.

The biggest difficulty I had with this book was believing, as the subtitle sug

reading a history of maple syrup in Canada. As a historian I was expecting much more, but then I realized that it was foolish to get hung up on the book's subtitle. When I realized that the book was both a semi-autobiographical and a contemporary account of the last 30 years of the maple syrup industry in Canada, I was able to read it with a fresh and different perspective.

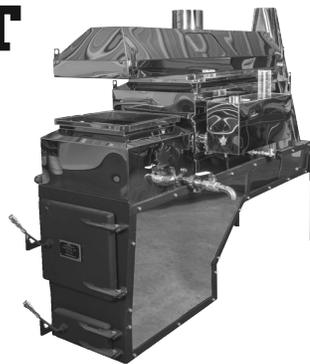
From that perspective, the greatest strength of the book, especially for American readers, is the thorough retelling of the events of the Canadian maple syrup industry over the last 20 to 30 years. For most English-speaking fans of maple history and culture, the specific events and organization of the Quebec maple industry are a convoluted mystery. To that, readers will enjoy a series of chapters that clearly Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a maple industry historian. You can read more maple history articles like this on his website,

[www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com). recount recent developments in Canadian maple, most notable among these, the battles and dramas behind the formation and solidification of power of the Québec Maple Syrup Producers Federation, the Great Canadian Maple Syrup Heist, the conflicts over access to crown land between syrup makers and the logging industry, and the challenges of balancing flavor and quality with quantity and how syrup pricing is changing. Despite my criticisms and critique of this book, it is a thorough, well written, and enjoyable book that will inform anyone interested in maple syrup and the maple industry in North America. All syrup makers should pick up a copy of this book.

Dr. Matthew M. Thomas is a maple industry historian. You can read more maple history articles like this on his website, [www.maplesyruphistory.com](http://www.maplesyruphistory.com).

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