THE COUNTRY KITCHEN

Della T. Lutes

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"A WORD FOR WHAT WAS EATEN": AN INTRODUCTION TO DELLA T. LUTES AND HER FICTION

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In his discussion of the literature of knowledge and the literature of power, Thomas DeQuincey asks, "What do you learn from *Paradise Lost?* Nothing at all. What do you learn from cookery book? Something new, something that you did not know before, in every paragraph." 1 The quotation has at least this application to a discussion of the writings of Della T. Lutes: she stands as an author who found a special place for *cooking* in her *fiction.* At least in DeQuincey's way of thinking, then, she produced works which represented both kinds of literature—which is more than can be said for John Milton.

Those familiar with the Romantic English essayists, of course, will know that DeQuincey next asked a third question: "But would you therefore put the wretched cookery book in a higher level of estimation than the divine poem?" And he argued, well, of course not, because what you "owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are still but a million of advancing steps on the same earthly level; what you owe is *power—that* is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards, a step ascending as upon a Jacob's ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the earth."[2]

I will not try to contend that the writings of Della Lutes "ascend to mysterious altitudes above the earth." She was not trying that. She did, though, think that some of the dozens of dishes prepared by late 19th century southern Michigan farm

wives were foods for the gods and otherwise participated in celestial heights of gustatory beatitude. But I am not going to follow her very far, either, in those metaphorical flights.

I will contend that her writings are unusual and that their uniqueness urges that they deserve to be more widely known than they are, these days. That "different" quality, as our students would say, that uniqueness, was quickly recognized when the first of her series of six autobiographical novels appeared in the fall of 1936. The American Booksellers Association voted *The Country Kitchen* one of its five awards—"The Most Original Book Published in 1936." It would be interesting to know what Christopher Morley had to say about it, when he made the announcement; it would be interesting to learn what Mrs. Lutes said on that occasion, too. Just to give a sense of the chronological context of that award: on the same occasion, two of the other four awards went to Van Wyck Brooks, for his *The Flowering of New England* (the Most Distinguished work of general nonfiction) and to Margaret Mitchell, for *Gone With the Wind.* Though Mrs. Lutes's book may not have achieved the success of the latter, it yet had an immediate and continuing popularity: it was reprinted eight times in the next five months and went through a total of fifteen reprintings during the five years between September 1936 and October 1941.

And so the rest of her novels established her as a writer of originality and her originality was recognized both by publishers and by the reading public. She published one work of fiction each year, from 1936, to her death in 1942: *The Country Kitchen* was followed by Home Green, Millbrook, Gabriel's Search, Country *Schoolma'am,* and *Cousin William.* Those years, of course, were the beginning of the Second World War. It was not a time exactly suited to the quiet cultivation of a literary reputation based upon recreations of pioneer life, and a few months after her death, July 13, 1942, the reprintings of her books stopped. I think that conditions today might well be suited to another look at her contributions: in the past four decades, we have seen merge a new sense of regional history, the women's movement, and a more inclusive way of looking at the nature of literature. Any one of these three elements would be a sufficient justification

for re-examining the life and works of Della T. Lutes, but it happens in her case that all three apply.

We might begin, then, with a look at her career, since it figures importantly in her writings and helps to give them their unique character. Not much about her life has as yet been published: the sources of information are scattered in brief notices in newspapers and magazines which accompanied the appearance of her final six novels, and little has been said about her preceding fifteen books of greatly varied types. Besides those twenty-one books, she contributed more than forty-five articles, poems, and stories, most of them, from the mid-thirties on, appearing in the *Atlantic, Forum,* and *American Mercury* magazines.

In an article from *Forum,* in 1937, Mrs. Lutes explained at length her title, "Why I don't Tell My Age." Her reason does not strike me as coy, in any way. Essentially, it is one which middle-aged people today understand pretty well; viz., when we are forced to state our age, even those close to us are so stunned by the datum that they no longer believe the qualities of whatever evidences of liveliness that meet their senses, but instead, in an immediate and irrational change of face, start to think of us as dangerously feeble and otherwise so verging on senility as to require the gentle care demanded of bone china. Della Lutes had seen that happen to others, and she therefore chose to deflect all questions about her age. In fact, she was born sometime in 1866, if the record of the 1870 Census of Jackson County—open to all comers—is to be believed.

She was the only child of Elijah Bonnett and Almira Frances Bogardus Thompson, who had come to farm in Jackson County, Michigan, from New York state. When she was twelve, her father, then in his late sixties or so, twenty years older than Della's mother, sold the farm and moved into the southern part of the town of Jackson, near the Griswold Park school.

After graduating from Jackson High School, she qualified by examination to teach in the district schools—she was then sixteen — and had assignments in or near the communities of South Jackson, Horton, Hanover, and Grass Lake during the next

three years. When she was nineteen, she accepted a teaching position in Detroit, where she taught for a time at the Grove School, until her marriage, in 1893, to Louis Irving Lutes, the owner of a bicycle business in the downtown area. They had two sons, Ralph Irving and Robert Brosseau. While in Detroit, the Lutes home became a center for neighborhood life. Mrs. Lutes is credited with organizing the women's club, Detroit Homemakers, and remained a life-long honorary member of it.

She was also active in the Womens Writer's Club of Detroit. She said that the first writing for money that she did appeared *in The Detroit Free Press. A* five-part story, entitled "Deestrick No. 5," began publication in the *Delineator* magazine in the October issue of 1905. This first substantial publication shows her to have three basic convictions as a writer: first, the subjectmatter is autobiographical; second, the form is narrative; and third, the colloquialisms often reflect her keen ear for dialect— about which more later.

Her second publication appeared in 1906. It was a small book, called Just Away: A Story of Hope.[3] Reflecting the recent death of her first son, Ralph, it is, as its subtitle says and her Dedication more fully explains, a novel directed "to the mothers who sorrowed with me in my sorrow ... hoping that somewhere in its pages there may be a ray of hope or a gleam of comfort for the tear-dimmed eyes and anguished hearts." Its style is that of the dedication: formal language, selected with the purpose of dealing gently and helpfully with grieving readers.

As a result of her publications and, presumably, also from her activity with the Detroit Homemaker's Club, she was offered and accepted a position on the editorial staff of the Curtis publication, *American Motherhood,* in 1907. The family moved to Cooperstown, New York, in the same year. Five years later, in 1912, she became editor of the magazine, and when they were purchased, she also edited Table Talk and Today's Housewife. These magazines were sold in 1923 or 1924, and she then became Housekeeping Editor of the *Modern Priscilla* magazine and the director of its "proving plant," a kind of Betty Crocker institute, in Boston. She remained in that position, making her home in Holliston,

Massachusetts, until, under the pressure of the depression, the company was dissolved, in 1930.

During her editorial years, most of Mrs. Lutes's writings, both books and articles, reflect her professional journalistic assignment. By 1930, she had published eleven books and booklets, two of them collaborations. Representative titles express the subjects that would be expected from this phase of her writing career: Bible Stories from the Old Testament, Retold for Children; The Story of Life for Children; What Parents Should Tell Their Children; The Gracious Hostess; and Table Setting and Service for *Mistress and Maid.* Presumably having little time for contributions to other journals, during that period she published only two articles, in *American Home,* "Serving Breakfast without a Maid" and "Substitutes for the Breakfast Nook," in 1929, the year of The Crash.

As might be expected, her free-lancing during the early years of the 1930's was a continuation of her specialized journalism. She wrote two books, Bridge Food for Bridge Fans (1932) and *A Book of Menus with Recipes* (1936). During these years she also placed five articles in Parents Magazine, House Beautiful, and *American Home,* dealing with such practical concerns as announced by the titles, "This Is the Way We Wash Our Clothes," "Is There Actual Economy in Doing the Family Wash at Home?" (there is) , and including a co-authored article appearing under the exclamatory invitation, "Meet the Bratwurstl"

But that vocationally-oriented, home-economics-minded phase of her writing career ended in 1936, with the publication of *The Country Kitchen.* In fact, three of its chapters had already appeared in revised form in *The Atlantic Monthly.* From that time on, her works dealt almost exclusively with her new writing purpose; namely, the fictional creation and the autobiographical reminiscences of late nineteenth-century rural Michigan. The subjects, it is to be noted, were not entirely new; they still centered around her professional preoccupations of the preceding decades: "Breakfast, Old Style," "Church Supper," "Mis' Draper's Parlor," and "Settler's Grub." And she also continued to publish occasionally in some of the same magazines: *Parents Magazine,* American Home, and Women's Home Companion. But her style

had changed; her method was usually narrative; and she was now appearing in journals that were more nearly representative of that literary focus that she was cultivating: *The Atlantic Monthly,* American Mercury, Forum, Saturday Review, and at the end of her life, the literary section of
the *Christian Science Monitor.*

It is appropriate, now, to explain the title of this essay. It derives from another quotation. Speaking in 1928, Virginia Woolf observed: "It is a curious fact that novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten. It is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever. . . ."[4]

Whether Della Lutes took that observation as a specific challenge and theme for her own fiction, I cannot say. She may have done so, but she already had sufficiently compelling reasons of another kind for her recognizing the importance of food. Anyone imaginatively projecting himself into the existential "feel" of the life of pioneering farmers will understand how the preparation and eating of food would become the embodiment of life at its most complete and satisfying. After all, it is not accidental that the Lord's Supper is the central sacrament for Christians. In little Delly's case, that country kitchen was not merely the place where the food was made ready, cooked, and eaten—the kitchen was where most of her young life was most deeply lived. She makes no reference to going to her bedroom to study—to say nothing of going into a library: the farmhouse bedroom was too cold for studying in during the school year, and there just was no library. Nor does she speak about the family or living room as a center of social life, where she carried on the important conversations with her parents and their friends. The most important room was, in fact, the kitchen. It was the family room, the dining room, the study—all of them—combined. And, for her own life, inciting her to her career, there was displayed on one of its walls, presumably placed there by her father, a large map—the world to be opened up by education. For her, the country kitchen was the central source of nourishment—not only nutritional, but social, spiritual, and intellectual.

In the novel which commemorated the room, she spared for food enough words to include at the end an index, called "For the Cook's Convenience," listing references to descriptions of, or recipes for, sixty-seven different dishes. She included the same device in the second of her novels, *Home Grown,* the following year; but she dropped the practice in her remaining four books.

Her decision to omit the index, as a matter of fact, signals a shift of emphasis in these six books: in the first two, the recipes are pretty straightforward instructions. For instance, when she refers you to the recipe for apple butter, you find that "you put ten gallons of sweet cider into the cauldron and let it boil away to half. Then you added—a quart or so at a time—three pecks of pared, cored, and quartered apples," and so on. But only relatively straightforward, I must say, because even in these early books, her stylistic verve delights as I expect few cookbooks do. Listen to the way she completes her account of how to make that apple butter:

This you let cook over a slow fire for four or five hours. Then you added (stirring all the while with a long wooden paddle) ten pounds of sugar and five ounces of cinnamon and boiled it until it thickened, never forgetting to stir, lest it stick to the kettle.

And there you are with your apple butter, and welcome. To be out of doors on an October day with a blue sky overhead, sun on your back, and only the gentle lip! with which an autumn leaf breaks its loose hold upon a parent stem to mar the silence, would be a joy under any circumstances— almost. To have to stand and stir, stir, stir, for five, six, or more hours—well, I do not like apple butter anyway.[5]

Even though she is giving a recipe, she has other things cooking. Being a young pioneer was not, for Della Lutes, all lovely colors, cozy feelings, and sweet tastes filtered through rose blossoms a la Hallmark Cards. She was a sturdy individualist, who wrote with exactness about what she had seen, known, and felt—even during the period she called the "golden decades." In her following books, the characterization becomes stronger, the plotting tightens up, and thematic development increases. The art of her fiction grows.

Having seen that *The Country Kitchen* was awarded recognition as an unusual book, does it and her subsequent novels merit further attention? Was her writing "unusual" in any larger sense? Yes—I think that four qualities should be noted about them.

First, Mrs. Lutes's writing was "unusual" because she wrote with respect about American "country folk" when it was still not the respectable thing to do. Dorothy Canfield recognized this in her review of Lutes's third volume, *Millbrook:* "When in a Beethoven scherzo we hear a clear echo of lusty country dancing, big shoes clumping rhythmically, calloused hands joyously clapping out the accents, or in a Grieg song catch the wistfulness of a lonely saeter-girl, or when Dvorak uses Negro spirituals in the `New World Symphony,' we nod in approving recognition and tell ourselves, 'Ah yes, use of country folklore by the artist.' Why has it, I wonder, taken us so long to emerge from an uneasy, embarrassed self-consciousness about our own country folklore?"' That "country" thematic content came during a decade when America's leading writers had other concerns: Sinclair Lewis on the attack, Ernest Hemingway expatriated and writing about foreign adventures, and John Dos Passos administering his Marxist fictional dosages. (Incidentally, I have found almost no comment by Mrs. Lutes upon the major American writers, but there is one that she made about Dos Passos: in a letter, she mentioned having read his *The Big Money* and added, "but then I felt pretty well besmirched after I had." She is also said to have detested Faulkner.) In some sense, then, Della Lutes's fiction can be seen as a defense of American character and life.

Secondly, she had an unusual sense for the uniquely characteristic detail, an eye for the lively real. Her defense of America certainly was not a matter of blind patriotism; she rendered people with their warts. She presented the truth in its wholeness, and if that meant that even her portrayal of her fictional father came over with traits of meanness and arrogance and not always restrained sadistic tendencies, his counterbalancing qualities of liveliness and large-scale dramatics and his general gusto for life added up to a wholeness of character that was beauty enough.

This sense for accurate detail appeared, of course, in the accounts of food and its preparation that made *The Country Kitchen* distinctive. She not only described recipes (or "rules," as the women called them) clearly enough so that the reader could try them out in the kitchen, but she brought out the distinctiveness of ingredients that the pioneer cooks used. This was what Edward Weeks remembered about her writing. Editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* at the time when Mrs. Lutes submitted her first selections, he said in a recent letter, "there was a recipe of one of her family's favorite dishes with little touches which most cooks never heard of, such as adding a touch of clove to a chocolate cake, much to its improvement."

A third "unusual" element of her writing was her ear for dialect. In *Pygmalion,* George Bernard Shaw made, as he says, a "desperate attempt to represent Liza Doolittle's dialect without a phonetic alphabet," and gave up after giving her six lines. Lutes stayed with her effort much longer. I don't know whether rural American speech patterns were quite so rich in nuances as Cockney; at any rate, her recording of dialogue most of the time is easier to read than those few lines of Shaw's. Nevertheless, she does capture a number of speech habits which strike me as being both unusual and convincing. The pronunciations and other locutions, seem not merely arbitrary—and clumsily invented—, but sharply-perceived curiosities.

This point may be illustrated in some examples of dialogue. "Talking don't go with ager," said the doctor, feeling pulse and brow. Gabriel, himself, is called by some of the characters "Gaberl"—not all of them and not all of the time. Baberl, one of the characters explains, had come from York State, where he had lived in Rome on "the canawl." Those examples come from Lutes's fourth novel, but she introduced this kind of acute recording of speech in her first one. The specific instance which first caught my attention to this trait of her writing was her use of the clipped "t" to indicate "to" or "it." For instance, Aunt Sophrony, speaking of young Delly's father, says, "I wish't 'Lije had a pumkin pie big 's this table and he 's right in the middle of 't." That bit of dialogue, come to think, is pretty close to the kind of detail that Shaw put into his "desperate attempt."[7]

"I wish't" uses one apostrophe to connect the two words that would formally be written as "wish that." That seems to me to be a fine perception: it might have been elided as "wisht" or written as "wishut," which would have resulted in an ugly looking and over-clever attempt, or it could have been written as "wishit," which would have been closer to capturing the sound of speech, but would then have gone too far beyond a convincing duplication. As it stands, it is accurate—unusually so, I think. And so are the apostrophes in "big 's" and "he 's" and "middle of 't." In those three, the single letters stand apart from the preceding words, with the clipped sound indicated by attached apostrophes in front of each.

But this all probably needs to be examined by a linguistics specialist. I have a strong notion that Della Lutes's effort would be found to be an exceptionally accurate rendering of the dialect of the period and locality. I would not be surprised, either, to learn that she fought some battles with editors to get her dialogue written as we find it.

Finally, a fourth element is her sense of distinctive form. Her fiction is carefully patterned. In *Home Grown,*[8] for instance, her second novel, she alternates between incident and object as symbolic representations of pioneer life, as her chapter titles show. The one called "Cousin Saryette Goes into a Decline" begins the grouping of twelve chapters that comprise the novel. It tells of the jilting of Cousin Saryette, who takes to her bed in the fall of the year, after Jerry Oliver took her to a "bow'ry dance" and then took a different girl home. Seventeen-year-old Sary is unable to leave her bed until Spring, when she learns that Jerry has now jilted her rival: the news removed the cause of her grief: "You see, she didn't have to feel ashamed no longer—alone. There was the Worden girl too." Throughout this selection, we learn of methods and potions used for treating such invalided people, we have a colorful account of the advantages of riding a pung in snowbound weather, and we find out about the methods for treating winter colds.

That chapter is followed by one titled, "The Tin Dinner Pail," which relates Delly's experiences of attending a country school, mainly those specifically centered in the contents of the lunch

pails and the customs of sharing them, but also affording a chance to become acquainted with the shiftless neighbor, farmer Covell and his deprived, shoeless daughters, who frequently wheedled the younger Della's tastier food from her, since their mother had so little to offer, the male "pervider" being such a failure.

This technique of objectifying a theme through either anecdote or an object is illustrated by other titles in the collection: "Jodie Acts as Pallbearer," in which nine-year-old Jodie Bouldrey and three of his classmates are mustered into service for the burial of an infant child; and in "The Strawberry Festival," which not only presents the colorful details of the social activities of that occasion, but also gives further point to it by describing recipe for the strawberry dessert—in language that entices even the indifferent: once the shortcake is baked, you are to "Turn your hot cake out on a platter and split it in two, laying the top half aside while you give your undivided attention to the lower. Spread this most generously with butter just softened enough (but never melted) to spread nicely, and be sure to lay it on clear up to the very eaves. Now slosh your berries on, spoonful after spoonful—all it will take. Over this put the top layer, and give it the same treatment, butter and berries, and let them drool off the edges—a rich, red, luscious, slowly oozing cascade of ambrosia. . . ."[9] And so on.

I am told by a bookseller that requests for copies of Della Lutes's *The Country Kitchen* are rather frequent, these days. That is likely to be symptomatic of a favorable climate for the reprinting of her fiction. Carlton F. Wells, Emeritus Professor of English of the University of Michigan, who chaired a committee of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English that produced a literary map of Michigan in 1965, thought enough of her writings to bring them to the attention of historian Bruce Catton, and Catton commended *The Country Kitchen* and made use of it in his bicentennial history of the state. Recently, Professor Wells has written to me, "I regard her *The Country Kitchen* as an American classic." These testimonials, underscore my own conviction that her writings should be reprinted—and not just The Country Kitchen.

Finally, Della Lutes was impressive not only as a writer but as a person. She began her career as a novelist at an age when most people shovel off their responsibilities to life. Edward Week's comment in a letter reminded me of this fact: "She must have been in her mid sixties when she began writing for us and I was sorry when she stopped." If my calculations are right, she was sixty-nine in 1935, when her first story appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly;* and she was in her seventies when then late thirtyish Mr. Weeks wished that he might have received more of her work. That, to me, is a graceful acknowledgement of the creative, liberated potentiality of old age made by a truly liberal young editor. The liberality should be recognized, and the creativity should be toasted.

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NOTES

1. "The Poetry of Pope," The Collected Words of Thomas DeQuincey. Edited by David Masson. Vol. XI. Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1890, p. 55.
2. Ibid. pp. 55-56.
3. Cooperstown: Grist, Scott, and Parbhall, 1906.
4. *A Room of One's Own.* "A Harvest Book." New York: Harcourt, p. 10.
5. *The Country Kitchen.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1936, p. 178.
6. *Atlantic.* 163 (January, 1939), p. **XII.**
7. Quotes from *Gabriel's Search.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1940, pp. 7-9.
8. Boston: Little, Brown, 1937.
9. *Home Grown.* Boston: Little, Brown, 1937, p. 129.