

A book to warm cold frontiers

By Peter Whelan

The closing down of Eaton's mail order service this May marks the end of an epoch, bringing back nostalgic memories for Canadians who have poured over the catalogue in the remoter areas of their country. It was a link with civilization, with fashion, with practical answers to one's needs — long before modern communications were invented. This is how Peter Whelan sung its requiem in *The Globe and Mail*, Toronto, when its demise was announced.

Ah, Timothy, could you know how your book of dreams would filter into the heart of this country?

Probably not. The T. Eaton who started T. Eaton and Co., as he called it, sends a hardnosed picture down the seven decades since his death.

To say the announcement that Eaton's catalogue mail-order service will die in May will bring national mourning is premature.

But start with this: to be Canadian-born and less than affluent from any but the biggest cities means almost surely that Eaton's catalogue owns a corner of one's warm memories.

Think of achieved dreams: a boy's first wrist watch, a girl's first prom dress, toys that Santa somehow knew about had most young eyes intent on pages of the magic book (fall and winter version).

And unachieved dreams: of sitting in a winterbound kitchen closing the pages reluctantly on — what was it, a suit or dress, something for loved ones — something with a price tag too big. But of having the dream to warm the cold pressing from outside.

These are the personal dreams. Leaf through the memories of older Canadians — or older Eaton catalogues, and see, dimly, T. Eaton's vast impact on national dreams.

Settlers' store

It is an American cliché to speak of guns that won the West. It is in Canadian character to wonder how much a prosaic book of business conquered cold frontiers.

"I can recall 70 years of Eaton's catalogues," David Willis, 75, editor of the weekly *Alliston Herald* says.

"If it were not for services the catalogue rendered in pioneer days — and they run past the First World War — I don't know how people would have got along. The settlers used the catalogue as a complete department store."



FARM BUILDINGS AND EQUIPMENT



SOLDIERS' LAND SETTLEMENT SCHEME

This Booklet contains official plans and drawings of buildings which have been designed by the Settlement Board for Soldier Settlers only.

Suggestions are also given for four different Soldier Equipments:—

- No. 1 - One-Man Equipment.
- No. 2 - Two or Three-Man Equipment.
- No. 3 - Man, Wife and Small Family Equipment.
- No. 4 - Man, Wife and Larger Family Equipment.

THE T. EATON CO. LIMITED
WINNIPEG CANADA

His memory draws on his father's stories of the last century and his own of this, particularly his own frontier 20 miles from Parry Sound.

They were three families in a cluster of houses by a lake, four miles from anywhere by a road called bad then — and recalled as impossible in today's terms — or three miles by boat across a lake.

"In the autumn, the wives got together with their families and ordered for the winter: clothes, hatchets, snowshoes, food, bedding, pages and pages of order, all we needed for winter hibernation. And winter was four months of isolation. What you forgot in the order you did without, and that could be serious.

"You younger people must think of what those winters were to understand: No roads, total isolation. No radio, no TV. What you had at freezeup is what you had until

spring. You were on your own resources — mentally too."

The catalogue and Dr. Chase's Almanac were "the two important books. The almanac told the weather, all the jokes and your horoscope. The catalogue, well, that was your eyes on the rest of the world.

"The catalogue and the Bible probably contributed more to keeping some families sane till spring than anything else. The catalogue meant something to look at and something to hope you'd get."

Drab beginning

The first Eaton's catalogue was a drab 32 pages of lists and prices in 1884.

The first black and white drawings came in 1886, 10 pages of dresses, curtains and rugs in colour in 1902.