

REVIEWS - COMPTES RENDUS

A Pictorial Guide to American Spinning Wheels. D. Pennington and M. Taylor. Sabbathday Lake, Maine: Shaker Press, 1975. 100 p., 71 pls. ISBN 0-915836-01-7. \$4.00

The book is, as the authors describe it, a pictorial guide. With the aid of 71 plates the reader is given a tour of American spinning wheels past and present, introduced to some early and contemporary European wheels, and acquainted with a sampling of Canadian wheels and additional spinning equipment. The journey is made particularly pleasant by the quality of the publication. A soft cover edition, the jacket, paper, typesetting, binding, and layout are excellent. The photographs of the wheels are exceptional; one fully expects to see the photographer's name, Jim Munsie, on the cover along with the authors'. Composite drawings near the front of the book are accompanied by clear labels indicating the names and parts of the traditional spinning wheel. The authors adhere to simple style/function nomenclature in their choice of a "flax" and a "wool" wheel to represent the two main classes of wheels featured in their study. Additional breakdown of wheel styles implicit in the chapter headings include double-flyer flax wheels, double-treadle double-wheel flax wheels, patent wheels, unusual wheels, Shaker wheels, and Canadian wheels.

The majority of the wheels featured in the guide belong to the authors whose combined collection, as stated in the preface, numbers over 200. While recognizing the dearth of available information on regional and national characteristics and on dating, the authors have chosen to emphasize the diversity of wheels as the subject on which they are presently most knowledgeable. The preface also states that Pennington's original involvement with wheels stemmed from an interest in

how they worked and that "having satisfied his mechanical curiosity, he began to wonder how old they were and where they came from." The technology or mechanics of spinning wheels is, however, dealt with fairly simply. Although the focus of the guide is upon wheels of the United States, Canadian spinning wheels are also involved in the survey, both consciously and unconsciously.

It is with the Canadian content of the manuscript and the implications for research that this review is most concerned. The chapter on Canadian wheels is exceedingly brief -- one full page of text and two figures -- and is restricted in content to the portrayal of a style of Quebec wheel common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These are described as typical Canadian wheels and praised as being excellent wool spinners. Serious spinners are "advised to find one of these" as "they are extremely plentiful and have little antique value."

It is interesting that so recent a publication should present such a simplified version of the Canadian experience. While reports on spinning wheel history are still sparse, even a cursory examination of the opening chapters of Harold B. Burnham and Dorothy K. Burnham's Keep Me Warm One Night (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972) would have done much to acquaint the authors with the range and variety of some of the wheels in Canada. All indications suggest, however, that it may already be too late, outside Canada, to expand the term "Canadian wheel" beyond that style common to American dealers.

Equally interesting is the reference to the availability of these wheels. While it may be true that these wheels have "flooded antique shops of late" in the United States, the flood is a mere trickle today in Quebec and Ontario. Since 1967 "supplies" have dwindled and prices risen so that a Canadian

spinner touring the shops today would be hard pressed to find a "Canadian" wheel in good shape without a considerable search.

The consequences of wheel stereotyping arise when artifacts falling outside the realm of the conventionalized Canadian wheel appear in collections outside their original location. Specimens south of the border may go unrecognized and unvalued for their particular historic or regional characteristics and can be a constant or recurring frustration both to the American and Canadian researcher.

The movement of spinning wheels across the border has certainly been accelerated by the antique trade, but it is likely that in the past as in the present some of the prospective buyers were spinners desiring a functional machine. Regardless of their date of departure wheels originating in Canada are not always readily identified. In the chapter on American patent wheels there is a photograph of a "mystery" wheel (p.74). In its overall appearance it resembles a category of wheels referred to as "pendulum" or "lever wheels" - a refinement, of a sort, of wool or walking wheels. In spite of discovering a name and patent plate on it the authors could find no reference to the wheel's invention at the American Patent Office. Consequently they conjectured that the original patent was (a) granted but destroyed in a fire which eliminated many American patent records in the nineteenth century, or (b) not granted because it was an unsuccessful copy of other wheels that were patented, i.e. the Wight wheel.

The wheel is, in fact, a Canadian invention and the original patent papers are safely in the Canadian Patent Office. Solomon Dell, a millwright from Strathroy in southern Ontario, may well have had his wheels marketed in nearby Michigan where this particular specimen was discovered. Locating the correct patent papers solves some problems, i.e. identifying the country and circumstances of the inventor and learning what features of his invention the applicant claimed as his own improvements. However,

the confusion over the origins of this wheel raises several other points requiring further investigation:

1. To determine whether movement of specific wheels north to south, or vice versa, is recent or not. If an early transfer, was movement accomplished by immigrants with wheels as part of their personal household belongings or by spinsters or shopkeepers ordering and importing wheels on an individual basis? In which cases was there large-scale marketing of wheels of some specialized, popular, and/or inexpensive manufacture across national boundaries?
2. To discover and evaluate the transfer and exchange of styles, ideas, mechanical principles, fads, and lore in spinning between the two countries.

The radical changes the authors describe for American makers in the latter half of the nineteenth century had their parallels in Canada -- witness the Dell Wheel. The heyday of the "pendulum" wheel here was apparently during 1865-70 which is when the majority of Canadian patents for this type of wheel occur. Most Ottawa-based patents from those years were from Ontario. New Brunswick, which handled its own patents until after 1869, had its share of pendulum-lever wheel innovators.

Certain inventions were patented in both Canada and the United States, demonstrating some perception of advantages to be gained, or disasters to be avoided, by arranging protection in both countries. J. Bryce, whose wheel is illustrated on page 75, patented his Grand Haven Michigan table model in the United States in 1873 and was granted a Canadian patent for the same wheel in 1874. Many regions of Canada had restrictions in the early years on non-resident applicants so this particular line of inquiry has its limitations.

It would be reckless, however, to assume that all forms of wheels present in Canada throughout its history would be reflected in American collections through early market or migration movements and later antique and crafts demands. In the discussion of "wool" or "walking" wheels the authors

conclude that "on this side of the Atlantic this [the wool wheel] is a three-legged animal." As fate would have it four-legged wool wheels -- while not exactly galloping in herds across Canada -- do occur. The National Museum of Man collection has examples from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and Ontario. The why and wherefore of this and other styles which have remained local is worth pursuing.

The facts do not permit conclusions which include Canada to be made on the basis of American collections alone. What is evident, as this book bears out, is that meaningful reconstruction of the spinning wheel history of one country can be greatly aided by growing knowledge of a corresponding history in the neighbouring country. Though the subject is American spinning wheels, Taylor and Pennington's book affords the researcher on Canadian spinning wheels much valuable data and food for thought.

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Mills of Canada. Carol Priamo. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1976. 192 p., illus. (some col.) includes index.
ISBN 0-07-082402-9. \$19.95

The Mill. Produced and designed by William Fox. Photography by Bill Brooks. Written by Janice Tyrwhitt. Illustrated by Helen Fox. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976. 224 p., chiefly illustrated (part col.), index.
ISBN 0-7710-3193-9. \$29.50

Mills of Canada and The Mill are the first large picture