

REVIEWS - COMPTES RENDUS

Pottery in Alberta: The Long Tradition. Marylu Antonelli and Jack Forbes. Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 1978. 189p., illus. ISBN 0-88864-023-4. \$12.50

Medalta is one of this century's most widely known product trade names from Western Canada. The volume and rich diversity of stoneware products turned out by the various Medalta companies since 1916 guarantee that most Canadian museums have at least a few examples in their collections. There has long been a need for a history of the Medalta pottery. Pottery in Alberta was eagerly awaited by those interested in the history of Canadian ceramics and those responsible for ceramics collections. The book, unfortunately, does not live up to expectations. No doubt the authors had many problems. Company records do not exist in organized archival collections, documentation of Medalta products in museum collections is sparse, and the collections are scattered and incomplete. However, the rich sources of oral history used -- the people who owned or worked with Medalta potteries in Medicine Hat -- should have compensated in part for the other problems.

Much of the weakness of the book involves the technical presentation. It seems incredible that the University of Alberta Press would bring out a volume, which is largely a history, with the following omissions: virtually no documentation of sources beyond the acknowledgements, no identification of photograph sources, no identification of the collections from which the artifact examples were drawn, no chapter titles, no index, and no bibliography. The one concession made to the reader is a glossary of technical terms at the end of the book. It is rare to encounter a contemporary book with so little documentation. All of this means that most people attempting to use the book will be dissatisfied.

The preface states the authors' two objectives: first, to show the connection between the past and Alberta's present

artistic and production pottery, and secondly, to document "an industrial heritage" which came perilously close to being lost. The attempt to establish a connection between past and present is not successful. It is based largely on selected personalities and related activities, an approach which weakens the narrative of the industrial history and makes the whole much more difficult to understand. The recreation of an industrial heritage is much more effective. The book demonstrates the often complex changes in management and production direction of Medalta. The impact on pottery production of external forces such as the depression and the two world wars is well illustrated. Other interesting aspects are problems caused by technological changes, such as the switch from pottery jugs and bottles to glass containers for wine and soft drinks in the late 1920s, marketing problems caused by the conversion to the Imperial measure, continuing competition from foreign imports, and changes in public preferences in design. The authors also include much technical detail on the production of pottery and the use of clays but a curator will not find the book very useful in documenting specific Medalta material.

Since Pottery in Alberta is based largely upon interviews with people involved with Medalta, one of the strongest themes in the book turns out to be the description of labour conditions in a twentieth-century Canadian pottery. Working conditions during the first half of this century were poor and mechanization was introduced very slowly. The nature of the product required extensive physical labour at all stages of production from the extraction of the clay to unloading the kilns. This work was often carried out under a variety of disagreeable conditions -- extremely high temperatures, choking dust -- and in facilities lacking elemental sanitary and safety conditions. The high lead content of certain glazes posed particular health hazards that were little understood at the time. In the early years Medalta steadfastly opposed any improvement in working conditions, such as the eight-hour day, and resisted all union activity. A variety of tactics including employment of young women and use

of differential and secret pay rates for men maintained this position. All of this culminated in a bitter seventy-two-day strike in 1946.

Production figures are lacking but the authors claim that three-quarters of the stoneware used in Canada in 1924 came from the Medalta Pottery. The company had a coast-to-coast distribution system with strong markets in Quebec and Ontario. Distribution through mail order firms and chain stores is also mentioned but little detail is provided. Railways and hotels came to be a mainstay of the stoneware trade but a tremendous variety of specialized products were turned out for domestic use in Canada.

Pottery in Alberta is worth reading; it is rich in anecdotal material and it deals with an important subject previously little understood. Unfortunately, it is not a good publication viewed from the perspective of either the historian or the museum curator. The authors are to be commended for their effort but deserve a full measure of criticism for leaving the book in such an unfinished state. Medalta is a subject which deserves to be explored more fully in the future. Existing museum collections should ensure this. It is to be hoped that other researchers will be prompted to attempt similar but more complete studies of other Canadian potteries.

D.R. Richeson

.