

Silversmithing in Canadian History. Jeffrey J. Spalding. Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1979. 71 p., ill., biblio. ISBN 0919224-083. \$6.00 paperbound. Reviewed by Tara Nanavati.

In recent years there has been a revival of public interest in collecting antique silver. This trend is demonstrated by the increase in silver purchasing as well as the popularity accorded to prestigious private and public collections. A decade ago few museums in the country could be persuaded to exhibit silver. Yet by the late 1970s there was a waiting list of museums eager to borrow the spectacular Henry Birks collection. Only a few months ago the collection made media headlines when it was donated in its entirety to the National Gallery of Canada.

In 1978-79 western Canadian museums were given the opportunity of exhibiting a small sample of silver from the Birks collection. As a result the Glenbow Museum in Calgary mounted a major exhibition of Canadian silver and also published Silversmithing in Canadian History. The impressive title leads one to expect a definitive work on the subject. Indeed at first glance there is hope that this beautifully illustrated, easily affordable book might make a considerable contribution to Canadian silver research. Unfortunately, a closer reading dashes such expectations.

The preface introduces the reader to the social-historical context of silversmithing and briefly mentions the fact that the book has been written as support material for a better understanding of the exhibition. Except for this solitary sentence, there is no further evidence that an exhibit was the *raison d'etre* of this publication. There is no catalogue listing of either the artifacts selected for display or their makers. Neither is there any attempt to explain the curatorial decisions regarding the choice of artifacts selected. Nevertheless, the opening pages lead one to expect an exhibition catalogue.

"The Church," the first subheading of section I, is the best written section of the text. The author makes good use of his descriptive skills and assiduously avoids technical jargon. When he does use a term that might be unfamiliar to the general reader he explains the meaning clearly. These early pages show great promise. Unfortunately, Spalding abandons

this concise style in attempting to grapple with the complexities of early Canadian social, political, and economic history and their relationship to silversmithing. From this point on the book loses its cohesiveness and decisiveness.

The author would have been well advised to have outlined his intentions and then proceeded to accomplish them. As it is, Silversmithing In Canadian History attempts to be all things, at all times, to all people, and as such, it fails to succeed wholly in any one area. The perplexing question that must be asked is the intention of the book. Is it supposed to be an exhibition catalogue, a social history document, or indeed, as the name suggests, a history of Canadian silversmithing?

The serious lack of supporting evidence for the book as an exhibition catalogue has already been noted. Those who did not have the opportunity of seeing the exhibition in Calgary will ever remain ignorant of its scope, calibre, and depth of perception. A museum guide written for publication should be as complete an exhibition document as possible. As it currently reads, the reader can only assume that the subheadings in Silversmithing in Canadian History closely correlate to the exhibition plan.

But is it a book on social history? The thematic subheadings tend to support such a notion. Would the author have devoted so much space to the "Fur Trade" if he was not convinced of the importance of the period in Canadian history? Yet the book provides no insight into the who, what, and why of silversmithing in that era and in fact, no mention is made of specific items fashioned for the trade or of their makers.

The overall confusion of the book's purpose is further accentuated by an uneven approach in terms of relating the artifacts to their historical context. The material is organized into two major periods - French and English. In section I, "The Use of Silver in New France," no attempt is made to provide the historical setting for the ensuing material. Instead, the author immediately proceeds to categorize the silver according to its original functions. On the other hand, when "Silversmithing in English Canada" is introduced, the author includes a succinct general history under the subheading - "The Outpost Economy." If one period is worthy of such

treatment, why not the other? This is the type of question for which no satisfactory answer is forthcoming, unless, of course, the major categories and subdivisions of the book are not really intended to reflect an historical approach.

Is the book then a documentation of silversmithing in Canada? This is unlikely. As previously noted, sections exist that contain no references to silversmiths of the period or the objects made by these men. Other sections, such as that on "Indian Trade Silver" are not as well researched as one would expect from a book of this type. The material on "Presentation Silver" is sketchy and poorly organized. No attempt is made to present the reader with the inscriptions of the pieces photographed - a serious omission in a section that relies so heavily on such evidence.

In addition, Silversmithing in Canadian History suffers from other kinds of errors. Ramsay Traquair's name is consistently misspelled. Reference to the maker's "touch mark" instead of the maker's punch marks being stamped on silver pieces leads one to speculate on the author's clear grasp of his subject matter. Beyond these basic mistakes, editing errors also persist.

The book does have redeeming features, specifically its layout, cover design, and excellent photography. The colour photographs are quite outstanding and Ron Marsh is to be commended for his work in photographing a difficult subject. The liberal use of these illustrations certainly enhances the overall desirability of the book. It is regrettable, however, that the expectations created by the graphic design and the photography are not met in the written information.

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