

Selected Canadian Spinning Wheels in Perspective: An Analytical Approach.

Judith Buxton-Keenlyside. Ottawa, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, 1980. (Mercury Series, History Division Paper no. 30.) 336p., ill., biblio. ISSN 0316-1854/ISSN 0316-1900. Free. Paperbound.

Selected Canadian Spinning Wheels in Perspective: An Analytical Approach

is an important contribution to the study of handspinning in North America. The book is well written, informative, and profusely illustrated with photographic material and graphics. It focuses on a broad range of spinning-wheel uses as well as on aspects of mechanical systems employed by wheelmakers over the past century. While its contributions recommend this work, its coverage is by no means exhaustive. Questions such as the background of makers and the evolution of wheel type, form, and use in North America still elude students and spinners alike. In short, the book concerns itself more with the mechanical aspects of spinning than with an analysis of individual wheels and their makers.

Buxton-Keenlyside's text deals primarily with an analysis of the spinning process. The perspective is anthropological, which, in a very positive way, challenges the reader to ask probing questions about the historical development of the technology and craft of handspinning in North America. While the author's treatment of these issues is highly informed, her title is somewhat misleading. This is so because it suggests an analytical approach to the study of spinning wheels rather than a scope limited to definitions and the categorization of the spinning process throughout Canada.

The first two sections provide a background regarding the types of equipment used in various processes in order to achieve specific goals. The genesis of the processes is not the primary goal of the author, only the recording of its use in Canada. The third section, "A Survey of Selected Canadian Wheels," is just that. It provides "a sampling or cross section [sic] of various wheels common to the Canadian experience." The reader is told that many of the wheels "bear the earmarks of the spinster's or wheelmaker's culture or country of origin; some represent a blending of styles, and others exhibit an individual form evolved in and unique to Canada."

Unfortunately, at this point, the work departs from the analytical approach and concentrates on descriptions that are detailed in measurements

and weak in the analysis of available data. Not one wheel has a solid provenance and description whereby it could be used as a guide to make some concrete judgements about other like examples found in the field. Almost always a major piece of needed information is missing or a proviso is present.

On a more positive note, the author consistently demonstrates a keen awareness of the ever-attendant field research problem revolving around a lack of standardized nomenclature and classification systems for spinning wheels and equipage. In response to this need she does submit a format for categorization and further study.

The drawings are superb and easily understood and provide considerable assistance to the reader. However, the absence of complete, detailed drawings of different types of spinning wheels and their parts limits the lay reader in understanding the descriptive text. The photographic material, both descriptive and historical, adds much to the success of the publication. The photographs, however, are not universally analyzed as to their content in wheel types, dates, and general context.

Selected Canadian Spinning Wheels in Perspective: An Analytical Approach is an ambitious work, perhaps too much so, but certainly one that has been long awaited by spinners and scholars alike. It is an alert to the profession and, by design, not an attempt to answer all of the questions. Buxton-Keenlyside demonstrates that she is well aware of other related areas that must be addressed such as the morphological analysis of the wheel. She deserves high recognition for her role in pioneering research on handspinning — its history and on-going cultural significance. Her contribution together with other recent works by Harold and Dorothy Burham, Patricia Baines, and David Pennington and Michael Taylor have broken the rough ground in a field that is wide open for further and finer cultivation. It is now time to use the tools they have generously provided to dig deeper and to analyze more thoroughly existing data on a subject that has continuously played an important role in our mutual cultural heritage.

Peter W. Cook

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