

## Marilyn I. Walker, *Ontario's Heritage Quilts*

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Walker, Marilyn I. *Ontario's Heritage Quilts*. Toronto: Stoddart Pub. Co. Ltd., 1992. 260 pp., 219 illus. Cloth \$50, ISBN 1-55046-066-8.

Quilts are valuable and fascinating artifacts of social and economic history. They are the voices of nameless women, expressing in their patterns and colours the politics, religion, and personal and cultural symbols of their makers. Some tell life stories, some chronicle important journeys such as a westward migration, and some record life and death at home. Their fabrics reflect economic realities, from the number of mills to the taxes on imported cottons. Popular culture is revealed in the choice of design, whether traditional or the latest from *Godey's*. The history of quilts is an important, but sadly neglected, area of Ontario history, and any new work on the subject is to be welcomed.

The most recent contribution is a handsomely produced volume by Marilyn Walker, *Ontario's Heritage Quilts*. The author's stated purpose is to "introduce Ontario's pioneer quilters and their artistic creations to general readers, history buffs, and ... quilting aficionados" (p. 6). In demonstrating the relevance of quilts to Ontario history, the book succeeds, in that its presentation is so striking that it cannot help but tempt the reader to read more.

As a popular history the book is particularly effective in two areas: the range covered and the illustrations provided. Although historians may feel the range is not comprehensive, the book is not intended for historians - their main source remains the McKendreys' standard *Quilts and Coverlets in the Canadian Tradition* (Toronto, 1979). Marilyn Walker's book includes areas which are often excluded, such as ecclesiastical quilting, which she illustrates with a pall (albeit from 1991), and patriotic quilting, represented by a signature quilt for the Royal Visit of 1939. Another quilt affords a glimpse into the quilting traditions of the Blacks who settled in Ontario in the nineteenth century. The book has a good, concise introduction, as well as a valuable section on the care and cleaning of quilts. It concludes with instructions for three blocks, though these are far too daunting for beginners.

The masterful photography, however, is what makes the book a delight. Marilyn Walker was intimately involved in the design of the photographs, and the results are stunning. Three quilts in particular, placed on a snowbank and on foliage (pp. 13, 83, and 93), reveal a brilliant eye for colour and visual texture. Other quilts are placed in appropriate historical settings, such as the barracks at Fort George, and Ball Farm in the Niagara Peninsula. Another attractive feature is her digressions about furniture such as storage racks and rope beds.

Closer attention to editing would have been appreciated, however. In one case, the text discusses a quilt that has been cut off from the photograph (p. 100); in another, the labelling is reversed (p. 68); and in still another, the Loyalist guns discussed actually appear on an earlier page (p. 111), while a sword is shown in the photo in question (p. 117) - not that either is an appropriate prop for this quilt, which is Mennonite.

That this work is a popular history is clearly reflected in the writing, and it is here that the dangers inherent in the genre are evident. Marilyn Walker's style is enthusiastic, confident, and personable; but is also at times repetitive and vague.

One practice, which is pleasant for the lay reader but very jarring to the specialist, is the author's tendency to blur provenance and fantasy. There are too many lines like "while little is known about why this quilt was made, it *may be assumed* [my emphasis] that it was a wedding quilt" (p. 106). The quilt referred to in fact shows none of the symbols usually found in a wedding quilt, nor is the pattern one associated with weddings. That it was precisely and skilfully made does not necessarily indicate a wedding quilt.

The historical content in the text is interesting and on the whole accurate, but it lacks overall direction and continuity. The chapters are arranged not by chronology or region, but by type of quilt, which may be suitable for a general overview, but does not present a cohesive picture of Ontario's quilt history. As well, some of the historical information is misleading. On pages 110 and 111, two quilts are not properly identified. One quilt is not labelled "Tumbling

Blocks," as it should be; another is misnamed "Dresden Plate" when it is a simple "Fan" block. The discussion of the evolution of Broderie Perse appliqué does not indicate that it came very early - 1700s to early 1800s - and was developed because of the expense and scarcity of the chintz fabrics which were so popular. Instead, the author states that it was meant to imitate crewel work. Crewel work did influence the vines and flowers in ordinary appliqué, and did itself appear on quilts, but it did not influence the development of Broderie Perse as such. Again, on page 51, she suggests that dating a quilt with an indelible pen was not commonly done. While that may be true for the 1930s, it was definitely not uncommon from the 1830s to the turn of the century for quilts to be signed, dated, and even inscribed with indelible pen. These are minor points, but they show how closer attention to historical detail would have improved the text.

The book's most serious weakness, though, is its failure to meet its own objective of presenting Ontario's pioneer quilts, which the author defines as nineteenth-century. It touches on many quilting traditions, but barely mentions the earliest woollen quilts of the English and French settlers. While these quilts may be less attractive, they still form a large portion of the quilts of the "pioneers."

Moreover, of the 210 quilts illustrated and discussed, fully half are from the twentieth century and 47 are not from Ontario - 19 are not even Canadian. Surely somewhere in the "more than 2,000" quilts in Marilyn Walker's personal registry there were Ontario quilts which would have served to illustrate the trends the "foreign" ones do. Although one or two are extraordinary

examples of a type (e.g., the Hexagon on page 137), the remainder are quite ordinary. For example, on page 49, there is a Pennsylvania Dutch sampler from 1987 which, while beautiful, does not illustrate the type better than an older example from the Kitchener-Waterloo area would have. The problem may lie in the author's apparent unwillingness to work with museums, which contain many excellent specimens of Ontario quilts. Although she did not wish to include "museum pieces," a compromise here would have allowed the book to truly meet its objective. The presence of so many foreign examples must imply to the reader that there are no comparable Ontario pieces extant; and that is a grave misconception.

*Ontario's Heritage Quilts* does not present any new historical information, and since the quilts are drawn from a registry that is not publicly accessible, it is of limited use for researchers. However, such a genial and well-illustrated coffee-table book may inspire a general interest in quilt history similar to that in the United States, where research is ongoing, often publicly funded, and led by quilt historians. The Canadian quilting tradition follows our own political and immigration trends, and so is different in many ways, and at times in character, from the American tradition. Academics, governments, and quilt guilds need to work together to produce a comprehensive database accessible to scholars, which will in turn lead to a body of literature. This is an area of material history that has not yet caught the attention of Canadian publishers and researchers, despite a growing market. One can only hope that this book is an indication of an awakening interest.

## **Donald Wetherell and Elise Corbet, *Breaking New Ground: A Century of Farm Equipment Manufacturing on the Canadian Prairies***

**FRANZ KLINGENDER**

Wetherell, Donald and Corbet, Elise. *Breaking New Ground: A Century of Farm Equipment Manufacturing on the Canadian Prairies*, Saska-

toon: Fifth House Publishers, 1993. vi & 254 pp., photographs, bibliography, index. Paper \$14.95, ISBN 1-895618-23-1.