

Comptes rendus de livres

DIANE TYE

Review of

Beaudry, Mary C. 2007. *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Pp. 256, 46 black and white illustrations, US \$ 55.00. ISBN 0-300-11093-6.

In *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*, Mary C. Beaudry explores the history of a number of tools associated with needlework: pins, needles, thimbles, scissors and some less common items used in weaving, lace-making and the finishing of garments. A professor of Archaeology and Anthropology at Boston University, Beaudry devotes a chapter to each of these implements, first tracing its history and outlining techniques of manufacture and then offering a case study. Take, for example “the lowly pin.” Beaudry challenges the assumption that the discovery of pins on an archeological site is an indicator of the presence of women. Rather, she contends that pins vary. She argues that both men and women used pins in their sewing and that pins had many other functions as well. She goes on to trace the history and manufacture of pins and to discuss their dating. The bulk of the chapter is a description of a range of pin sizes and types (e.g., lills, common sewing pins, blanket pins, mourning pins, lace pins, wig pins, upholstery pins and keeping pins). The chapter concludes with an archeological case study of the use of pins in winding sheets and shrouds when burying the dead in 17th century Maryland. She takes a similar approach in her treatment of needles, thimbles, scissors and other less common items, which are the subjects of later chapters.

Beaudry’s goal is to draw attention to the “small finds,” the artifacts of needlework and sewing that too often are overlooked by archeologists. More particularly, her intention is to provide archaeologists with better ways of distinguishing among seemingly homogeneous categories of artifacts; to provide historians and collectors of needlework tools with information about what sorts

of things archeologists have recovered; and, through case studies, to show how to construct contexts for interpretation of needlework tools (9).

Undoubtedly, *Findings* will prove a valuable resource for archeologists and others wanting to identify needlework artifacts and to contextualize them historically. As a folklorist, however, I was most interested in Beaudry’s third objective: her contextual interpretation of sewing tools through case studies. Beaudry is wide ranging in her analysis as she looks at the ways in which artifacts of sewing and textile production link to aspects of culture—technological, social, economic and ritual—through history. She considers the multiple meanings inherent in these small findings and in doing so she problematizes our assumptions that finding a needle or pin indicated the presence of women; that all fancy work was a pastime for wealthy women of leisure; and that all utilitarian sewing was for immediate household use. Rather, she considers the role of men in needlework and addresses the situation of women who depended on income from handiwork. Beaudry suggests, therefore, that artifacts of needlework can be interpreted along several lines of social and economic relevance: everyday, practical or necessary work (sewing, mending, knitting); fancy work (embroidered pictures of muslin or whitework, cutwork, candlewicking, tambour work, stuffed work, canvas work and so on); and work of either sort produced for sale outside the home. Beaudry mentions being inspired by Rozsika Parker’s important work, *The Subversive Stitch* and she ends with a conclusion titled, “Stitching Together the Evidence,” that offers a gendered analysis of sewing.

For all that I enjoyed this book with its focus on the “small finds,” I have to say I was left somewhat unsatisfied. While the discussion was—as far as it goes—enjoyable, I feel it could have been further developed. For example, the conclusion might have been better positioned as an introduction with its points picked up and further explored throughout the book as they relate to the various needlework tools and, then, returned to in a concluding chapter. That said, I suspect that this work holds more for

those in Archeology than for readers outside that discipline. And, Beaudry’s thorough historical discussion in *Findings* will undoubtedly provide an important foundation for others to create future deeper cultural analyses. In the meantime, it is wonderful to see women’s material culture, which is often very difficult to assess and appreciate, taken seriously. *Findings* reminds its readers that the everyday is important and that the simplest objects often hide complexities.

References

Parker, Rozsika. 1989. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: Routledge Press.

ELIZABETH BEATON

Review of

Caplan, Ron, ed. 2005. *Views From the Steel Plant: Voices and Photographs from 100 Years of Making Steel in Cape Breton Island*. Wreck Cove, NS: Breton Books.

Pp. 224, black and white illus., \$18.95 soft cover, ISBN 1-895415-69-1.

This is an important publication because it is the first book specifically about the Cape Breton steel industry intended for popular reading.¹ Through numerous interviews of former steelworkers and others, and almost 100 photographs, it provides a comprehensive and empathetic—but not romanticized—look at the Cape Breton steel industry. This collection offers a strong realization of industrial life both inside and outside the plant. The early days of the industry, the labour movement, steel-making technology, management and the wider steel community are represented both through the voices of men and women directly involved and through song and poetry. Readers of more than twenty-seven years of *Cape Breton's Magazine* will notice that every chapter in *Views From the Steel Plant* is a reprint, and one is a secondary reprint from *Acadiensis*. Nevertheless, the book’s accessibility and its relevance for many workers from the industrial era give it particular value, not only as a tribute to Cape Breton steelworkers, but also as a serious contribution to oral history in Canada.

The vignettes related to each topic capture the steelworkers’ pride in their work. The workers describe how they acquired their steelmaking skills through watching and doing and, if lucky, through the generosity of more experienced workers. The different departments of the plant—open hearth, blast furnace, mills, shops, cranes, transporta-

tion—are all part of the network of specialized knowledge held by these workers. With intuition and a sharp eye as the basis of their skill, the complexities of steelmaking become almost an art form; the technology depicted subtly, yet clearly, through the stories of the workers. Their storytelling charm and prowess, sometimes tinged with wry humour, conveys a veracity of experience; one case in point is Frank Murphy’s recollection of the mere ten-minute work stoppage when his foot was cut off by the open hearth charging car.

The excellent photographs in this book help to depict the strength and skills of the steelworkers and the dangers they faced. Photographs also depict the passage of time. Pictures showing steelworkers at their job or in friendly interaction, and then later in life as they were interviewed, gives us a sense of “real” people once young, and now older and reflective. The academic reader might look for more consistent labelling of the photographs.

In his chapter, “The Steel Boom Comes to Sydney, 1899,” Ron Caplan documents the political conniving and general hoopla leading up to the coming of steel to Cape Breton. Local and North American newspapers and academic research by Ron Crawley are cited showing that the plants in Sydney and Sydney Mines were considered to be world-class operations. The maturity of the steel industry, centered on Sydney since the 1920s,