

# Mary Conroy, 300 Years of Canada's Quilts.

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### Mary Conroy, 300 Years of Canada's Quilts.

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Leslie Maitland

Canadian Inventory of Historic Building

300 Years of Canada's Quilts. Mary Conroy. Toronto, Griffin House, 1976. 133p., bibliography, index, illus. ISBN 0-88760-077-8. \$7.95

1 300 Years of Canada's Quilts is an ambitious attempt to interpret quilts as facets of the artistic, social, and economic development of Canada. To examine a craft within its social context is a good interpretive approach and so one expects good things from this book. However, major flaws make it fall far short of its promise.

2 The author traces quilting chronologically from the pre-contact era to the twentieth century, taking care in each period to set the scene in which quilts were made. The fact that the Indians made no quilts does not deter the author from devoting a chapter to them. In dealing with the early French and English settlement periods and the early settlement of the West, the author stresses again and again the struggles of pioneer life and the importance of the quilt to basic survival. Conroy further states that quilting was central to the

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social life of rural communities and that the evolution of materials and construction reflected changes in the economy. These points are unnecessarily belaboured. As well, the author goes a step too far in associating quilting with political events such as Confederation and the First World War. Coverage of the twentieth century is much better and it is good to see this often-ignored period examined.


3 The author's command of historical material is weak, as the following few points illustrate. Conroy states that British officers were encouraged to immigrate to Canada because they were retired here on half-pay. In fact they were retired on half-pay almost everywhere; the system of land grants (among other factors) had more to do with inducing retired officers to settle in Canada. Conroy states that at the time of Canada's initial settlement period (which she sets at 1820 to 1845) the Industrial Revolution was just beginning, and that the textile industry in Great Britain was one of the particular industries responsible for throwing people out of work. The Industrial Revolution had begun many years before this period and the textile industry was, in fact, employing vast numbers of people due to Britain's expanded markets. The significant fact that Conroy misses is that technological developments in textile production had shifted the base of the industry from the cottage system of skilled labour to unskilled labour in urban centres. Hence skilled labour in rural Britain was unemployed while those who were employed worked and lived in intolerable conditions. One last example: Conroy states that people built first log, then stone, and then brick homes, as though there were some kind of evolutionary process at work in house-building. Many people did abandon their log cabins as soon as they could afford to do so. But whether they chose stone or brick — or wood frame — depended more upon local geography than on the time period.

4 A glance at the bibliography explains why there is little new information presented in this book. There are exactly three primary sources mentioned: Godey's Lady's Book (1858 and 1860), Jameson's Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, and Catherine Parr Traill's A Canadian Settler's Guide. There are certainly many more original sources to consult than these in researching Canada's textile history. If, as Conroy states, one of her purposes in writing this book was to "compile and preserve...information" about Canada's quilts, then she should have realized that secondary sources and reprinted primary sources are as accessible to the public as the local public library and that rehashing this material wasted her readers' time and her own.

5 There are as well some stylistic problems which Conroy must solve before attempting any further writing. The unnecessary repetition of material has been mentioned. Imprecise thinking and illogical grouping of material characterize sentence, paragraph, and

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chapter structures. For example, one sentence states that fast settlement and encouragement from authorities for this settlement led to greater knowledge about the evolution of the quilt in New England. That is what the author said, but surely that is not what she meant to say as that statement is meaningless. In Conroy's defence one may say that she was not well served by her editors.

6 There are two types of illustrations. One is the series of colour and black and white photographs, the quantity of which is one of the redeeming features of this book. However, the focus could have been sharper in some of them and the colour reproductions could have been of better quality. The pictures seem to have been taken hastily and in poor conditions. The other illustrations are fifteen quilt patterns printed at the end of the book. The designs are well-drawn and the instructions easy to follow. Clearly Conroy is in her element here and she should be encouraged to work on a publication of the patterns. Such a book would be a useful contribution towards the continuation of a tradition and a contribution that Conroy would be qualified to make.

Leslie Maitland

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