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Quilting: Its Absence in Australia

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An Australia-wide study researching quilts made or brought to Australia before 1945 revealed that one of the most characteristic qualities of most Australian quilts was their lack of quilting.¹ A quilt is often defined as a textile sandwich comprised of at least two, or generally three layers—that is, a top, a backing, with some kind of padding layer in between—and the quilting is the stitching that holds these layers together. The quilting has a functional purpose to hold the padding in place, particularly if the quilt is filled with a fiber padding such as cotton or wool which will shift and bunch if not firmly held down, but the quilting can also be made decorative by the patterns of stitches used. The craft of quilting reached high levels of competence and artistry in both America and parts of the British Isles, but appears to be largely absent in Australia. The dissociation between the term “quilt,” the bedcover, and “quilting,” the process, is seen in the use of the word “quilt.” Australians, like the Irish and to some extent the British, use the term quilt to describe a bedcover, regardless of how many layers it contains or whether or not it is quilted.²

At the outset, it must be stated that while many quilts were made in Australia, there is by no means the length and strength of the tradition found in the United States of America. Population size differences are one obvious explanation. When Australia was first settled by Europeans in 1788, America already had a population of just under four million. By 1860 Australia's population had just reached one million, but America's was some thirty million. By 1900 Australia had only three and a half million people, while America had seventy-

six million. Remember that we are dealing here with countries which are approximately the same in geographical area. In the old world, Great Britain had a population of some sixteen million and Ireland a population of eight million in the 1830s, but while the British population grew for the remainder of the century, the Irish population had almost halved by 1900.

However, beyond the clear population differences, quilts did not have the central role in bedcoverings in Australia that they did in the United States. From earliest times, woolen blankets have traditionally provided the warmth for Australian beds, although recently continental style quilts have become widespread. In colder country areas, rugs made from a patchwork of furskins and lined with woolen baize were another popular bedcovering. In country areas, bags and the "wagga rug" also provided warmth, but were not called quilts. As Mary Gilmore wrote: "The boys slept under bags, . . . the father and mother had a possum-rug; the girls had patchwork . . . The girls, as soon as they could hold a needle, were set to work on new patchwork. But the new was not the old. We, in Australia, had not the patterns in prints that would make them."³ Australian quilts, therefore, generally tended to have a decorative function rather than a practical one.

Differences in climate are also probably a factor, but not necessarily because of the obvious difference between the temperate climate of Australia and the cold climate of much of America. Australian nights are still generally cool enough to require warm bedclothing, but it is woolen blankets, fur, or bags that have served this purpose. However, the mild climate allows outdoor work and gardening to continue year round, so Australian women never face long months of winter cooped up indoors, a time which many American women would have used to work on quilts. The poor quality soil and lack of rainfall has meant that Australia was not closely settled, so that pioneer women in nineteenth century country Australia were often very isolated, and unable to participate in communal activities such as American women did with quilting bees.

Quilt styles found in Australia

The major styles of quilts found in Australia are English-pieced mosaic quilts, log cabin quilts, crazy patchwork quilts, embroidered

quilts, pieced medallion style quilts, quilts made from woolen suiting samples, and Suffolk puff (elsewhere called yo-yo) quilts. The construction methods or materials of English piecing, log cabin, crazy patchwork, the woolen quilts and Suffolk puffs make quilting either unnecessary or impractical. However, even quilts made in the medallion style or embroidered quilts are usually found to be unquilted in Australia.

The English-pieced mosaic quilts are generally (though not always) made of a single shape, commonly either a hexagon or a diamond derived from the hexagon. They are made following the English technique by which pieces of paper of the exact shape are first cut out from a template, then fabric patches are folded and stitched (basted) to the paper, and finally the patches are oversewn (whip-stitched) together. The paper is usually (though not always) removed after the quilt is complete. This construction method is important to note, because it results in a very firmly sewn flat surface, with the seam allowances evenly distributed either side of every seam. It is quite unlike the American style of piecing in which seams are sewn with running stitch, a less dense stitch than the oversewing, and which has seam allowances pressed to one side, resulting in a slightly uneven surface. The firm flat surface of English piecing does not need the added dimension of quilting to enhance its appearance and give strength, and a simple lining is all that is required to finish a quilt. While English-pieced quilts may be quilted, and many English-made ones are, the quilting appears to be optional rather than essential.

The English-pieced quilts are generally of two kinds: those made from cotton, early ones of which date from the first half of the nineteenth century, although the style remained popular right throughout the period studied; and those made of silk, which generally date from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century. Illustrations of the English-pieced quilt can be seen in the work of Sophia Wilbow, a quiltmaker who made quilts for seven of her eight daughters. Three of her quilts are known to still be in existence, two of them made of diamonds, the other of hexagons.⁴ Each of the quilts is made of cotton, some from sample pieces from big mail order stores in Sydney, and each is lined with a fine piece of printed cotton obviously bought specially for the purpose. Blotting paper was used for the paper

Figure 1. Detail of English-pieced hexagon quilt made by the Country Women's Association of Euroa, 1931. 298 x 220 cm. Collection of the Euroa and District Historical Society, Victoria

patches, and these papers have been left in the quilts. None of the quilts are quilted. Sophia Wilbow lived in the Windsor area, in New South Wales, and the quilts date from the 1890s. Another example is a hexagon quilt made in the 1930s by the Country Women's Association of Euroa, a small Victorian town.⁵ The quilt was made as a raffle prize to raise money for the C.W.A. The quilt is backed with calico, and is not quilted. (Figure 1)

Log cabin quilts are to be found throughout the length and breadth of Australia. The quilts are constructed in blocks, with the beginning square and the strips being sewn in a sequence to a square of backing fabric. The blocks are joined together, and the quilt finished with a lining. The patchwork thus has an inbuilt middle layer, created through the construction. This inbuilt middle layer gives the

Figure 2. Log cabin quilt made by Sarah Monument (ca. 1962–1952), Stawell, Victoria, 1910–1930. 155 x 141 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

patchwork strength and stability, but obviates the necessity for quilting. Cotton and woolen fabrics were usually used, but during the Victorian era, silks and velvets were also employed. An example of a log cabin quilt is one made by Sarah Monument, of Stawell, Victoria.⁶ The patchwork was done between 1910 and 1928, and in 1930 the quilts was lined with printed cotton. The family referred to it as a “patchwork quilt” and did not use the term “log cabin.”⁷ (Figure 2)

Crazy patchwork was very popular in Australia, and many crazy patchwork quilts survive from all states of the country. Dated examples (those which have the date embroidered onto the quilt) most often show a date of the early 1890s. Several crazy quilts were listed in the catalog of the Centennial Exhibition, held in Melbourne 1888–1889.⁸ This dating is consistent with research indicating that the style

Figure 3. Crazy patchwork quilt made by Christina Brown, Bowenfels, New South Wales, ca. 1890. 178 x 148 cm. Courtesy Helen Hall, Ootha.

of crazy patchwork began in America in the 1880s, and circulated worldwide thereafter.⁹ Crazy patchwork quilts continued to be made in Australia through to the 1940s. Like log cabin, crazy patchwork is constructed onto a backing fabric. Random shaped patches are arranged onto the backing, which can be block size or whole quilt size, and stitched in place. Usually decorative embroidery was added around the edge of each patch and often further decorative embroidery was added to the center of patches, especially on crazy patchwork quilts of the late nineteenth century. Later quilts tend to use printed fabrics, and just have embroidery outlining the patch. An example is a crazy patchwork quilt made by Christina Brown of Bowenfels, New South Wales, around 1890. Finely embroidered, the quilt is lined with blue silk.¹⁰ (Figure 3)

Embroidered quilts are less common than the English-pieced

Figure 4. Embroidered quilt, made by the Misses Hampson, Westbury, Tasmania, 1901–1903. Courtesy Miss G. Fitzpatrick, Westbury.

mosaic, log cabin or crazy quilts, but are nevertheless a significant style of quilt in Australia. Examples date from the late nineteenth century through into the 1940s. A fine example is an embroidered quilt made in Westbury, Tasmania, between 1901 and 1903.¹¹ The quilt, of Turkey red cloth embroidered with white threads, was made by the Misses Hampson. The quilt is lined with a pink cotton print fabric. (Figure 4) Also included in the category of embroidered quilts are signature quilts, many of which were made to raise money for the Red Cross in both the First and Second World Wars. These quilts are mostly made from embroidered blocks which were joined together, generally without any interlining or padding. An example is a cot quilt made by the Balnarring Red Cross Society, Victoria, in 1918.¹² (Figure 5)

In the 1930s many embroidered quilts were made in the state of

Figure 5. Signature cot quilt, made by members of the Red Cross Society, Balnarring Victoria, 1918. 112 x 87 cm. Collection of the Red Cross Society, Victorian Division.

South Australia because the weekly country newspaper, the *Adelaide Chronicle*, published patterns for such quilts. The first patterns in 1932 were for a **Farm Life** quilt designed by Ruby Short McKim, so obviously these patterns were imported from America. In 1933 and 1934 patterns were published for an **Australian wildflower** and an **Australian bird** quilt. Surviving examples usually are not quilted, although some are partially quilted. Examples are a wildflower and bird quilt made by Miss Elsie Blake of Rocky Creek, South Australia.¹³ Both quilts, made as a pair, have the embroidered blocks joined together with a border and lining of the same fabric.

The medallion style of quilt is found in Australia, although in very much fewer numbers than styles already described. The medallion quilts come closest to the American way of constructing quilts, as

generally the patches are seamed together either by a hand sewn running stitch or by machine stitching. Patterns are usually extremely simple, and consist of squares, rectangles and large triangles made into borders which surround some simple center. Occasionally the center has some applique added. An example is a small quilt attributed to Elizabeth Magarey, believed to have been made around 1870.¹⁴ Successive borders contain squares, rectangles and triangles which have been hand-sewn together, and the quilt is lined with cotton fabric.

Many examples of quilts made from samples of suiting fabric were found, mostly originating from country areas in the 1920s and 1930s. The quilts were made from samples of woolen materials widely distributed to stores in country towns. When outdated, women collected the samples and made them into patchwork quilts. These quilts are usually lined, sometimes interlined, and occasionally have patchwork on both sides. These bed coverings are not necessarily called quilts by Australians, and are often called rugs. An example is a quilt made by Caroline West, of Trundle, New South Wales, about 1930.¹⁵ The quilt is made of triangles, arranged in a pattern of darks and lights. The quilt has an interlining of old blanket and a cotton twill backing. The layers are stitched together with occasional rosettes of lazy daisy stitches.

Another type of quilt found in Australia is the Suffolk puff. The quilts are made of small circles of fabric which have a gathering stitch drawing up the circle into a small round puff. The puffs are joined together, and sometimes a lining is added. The three dimensional nature of the puffs makes quilting unnecessary. An example is a remnant of a quilt made by Olive Bibb of Sydney around 1910.¹⁶ The small (35mm) diameter puffs are made of print fabrics, some probably fabric samples.

Applique quilts are not commonly found in Australia, and thus do not constitute a significant style. While some applique quilts do exist, they tend to be the work of a lone individual expressing herself through this medium, rather than any shared designs such as the American block patterns. Applique is sometimes found in conjunction with other styles, such as in embroidered or pieced quilts.

The nearest equivalent to a true three layered textile sandwich in

Australia is not called a quilt, but is known as the “wagga rug.” Construction of the wagga varies, and those made by men differ from those made by women. Country men, such as drovers and stockmen, simply stitched together several bags, such as wheat bags, and used the wagga outdoors as a sleeping cover. Waggas made by women are generally constructed from a base of a bag which is covered with a layer of parts of old woolen clothing, roughly stitched into place either by hand or machine. One family called the sewing “kangaroo stitches.”¹⁷ The base and its layer of woolen pieces is then covered, envelope fashion, with a bright cotton covering, often called cretonne. This covering is sometimes anchored in place with machine or hand stitching, or tying. The wagga is a cheap and quickly made bed cover, and was extensively used in country Australia until recent times. The wagga probably obtained its name from the country town of Wagga Wagga in southern New South Wales, a town which was a center for the wheat industry and important stock route junction in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. However, a similar kind of bed-covering from old clothing is described by Averil Colby as existing in England,¹⁸ and is also found in Ireland,¹⁹ so most probably the women’s wagga is traditional bedcover, given a nickname by Australians, nicknaming being an Australian tradition.

Quilting in Australia

Despite its scarcity, quilting is not entirely absent in all quilts found in Australia. Some quilts are partially quilted, having quilting which goes through a back and a lining, for instance, but not through all layers. An example is a large applique and embroidered quilt from Tasmania dated 1887.²⁰ The quilt is lined with a backing that has been machine quilted to an interlining. No quilting appears on the front of the quilt. Similarly, a crazy patchwork quilt made in 1891 by Marianne Gibson, from Wangaratta, Victoria, has a lining of honey-coloured silk which has been machine quilted to a layer of padding.²¹ Two embroidered quilts, a **Farm Life** quilt and an **Australian wildflower** quilt made by Minetta Huppertz in 1932 and 1933 from the patterns published in the *Adelaide Chronicle* show partial quilting.²² Both quilts alternate blocks of embroidery with quilted blocks. In the

Figure 6. *Farm Life* quilt made by Minetta Huppatz, Eurelia, South Australia, 1932. 193 x 188 cm. Courtesy Mr. L. McColive, Adelaide.

quilted blocks, the stitching goes from the top into a layer of padding, but not through into the backing. The backing is stitched to an interlining (which is separate from the padding behind the quilting), but again the stitching does not go through all three layers. The stitches used are back stitch, chain stitch, couching and stem stitch, but not running stitch. The construction of these two quilts is quite complicated, and is very different from the quilting one would expect in an American quilt. (Figure 6)

Another Australian variation on quilting is found in some crazy quilts which have padding stitched beneath each individual patch. The resultant effect is rather like a three-dimensional relief map. An example is a crazy quilt made by Maggie Gavin, of Melbourne, Victoria, around 1900.²³

Despite the general trend of finding quilts without any evidence

of quilting, a few quilts were discovered which are quilted. A medallion style quilt, which has an applique unofficial Australian nineteenth century coat of arms in the center, is flat quilted, that is, it is quilted without any padding or interlining.²⁴ The quilt was made by a Mrs. Brown of Bowning, a small country town in New South Wales, most probably in the late nineteenth century.²⁵ The quilting pattern is a combination of circle segments and hearts.

A quilt with a star pattern made by Margery Harvey of Oberon in New South Wales is a combination of English piecing, applique, and embroidery.²⁶ The quilt is padded with wool, and is quilted all over in a wave pattern with black thread. A surviving letter written by Margery provides rare documentary evidence of quilting in Australia.

Dear Daughter,

I am sending you Mays cloth and a quilt[.] she sent me 10s to get the linen so I got lining and wadding and made a print quilt that will do for the childrens bed and stand washing[.] think she wont think her 10s [wrong?] spent[.] me and Elizabeth have quilted it after a fashion the last fortnight but with a lot of pain[.] my head and neck have been very bad with neuralgia²⁷

The letter is undated, but references to family members indicate a date between 1900 and 1909. Family photographs show that several more quilts existed in the family, all following similar patterns and construction. Margery Harvey originally came from Cornwall, but she left England when only 20 years old, arriving in Australia in 1837.

Two other quilted quilts exist in splendid isolation from other Australian quilts. Both were made in the same area, in Portland, Victoria, around the turn of the century. Both share an applique block pattern, a bell-like flower, and both have winding borders of the bell flowers and leaves. One quilt was made by Miss Lydia Liddle, who placed the blocks on the diagonal so that the flower stems are straight up and down.²⁸ The quilt is very finely quilted with a pattern of sunflowers in the alternate blocks. She embroidered her initials in the center of the quilt. The second quilt, made by Mrs. Arrabella Cannon, has the blocks set straight so that the stems are on the diagonal.²⁹ Squares form the quilting pattern, with a leaf pattern in the alternate

Figure 7. Applique flower block quilt made by Arrabella Cannon, Condah, Victoria, ca. 1900. 275 x 214 cm. Courtesy Elizabeth Wallis, Condah.

blocks, but the pattern is not as elaborate as Lydia Liddle's. These two quilts presumably share a common origin, as the two women came from the same district, and although there are slight variations in the block pattern, it is essentially the same. The use of the American style applique block pattern in both quilts is as unusual as the quilting, and perhaps indicates an origin from elsewhere, possibly via family connections in Ireland where both Arrabella Cannon herself (she arrived in 1856) and Lydia Liddle's parents originally came from (though Lydia was born in Australia). One of Arrabella Cannon's relatives emigrated to America, so this is also a potential source. Arrabella Cannon made several log cabin quilts, and the family believe she also made another applique quilt, now unlocated. (Figure 7)

In the 1930s, nine flat-quilted whole cloth quilts were made by Isabella Cooke, of Victoria. One quilt has a chevron pattern, and has

been made from white fabric.³⁰ The quilt has a bound scalloped edging. A descendant in the family still owns the quilting frame used, the only quilting frame or evidence of one found in the survey of quilts in Australia.

Although the existence of these quilts indicates that quilting was not entirely unknown in Australia, it does appear that they are the exception rather than the rule. No evidence has been found of any quilting being connected with a social event, such as the American quilting bee or Irish quilting party.

Why the lack of quilting?

One problem in explaining the general absence of quilting in Australia is a general problem with all quilt research, namely, that we can only view the past through the surviving quilts. It is probable that quilts made primarily for a decorative rather than a utilitarian purpose were more likely to survive, because they were less likely to be used and worn out. However, reminiscences and literary sources do tend to reinforce the general picture painted.

The lack of quilting needs explanation, and there are several possible reasons. Patchwork and quilting traditions generally came to Australia from the British Isles, the predominant source of most immigrants to Australia. It is important to note that in Britain there was a divergence between patchwork and quilting. Because there was not necessarily a relationship between patchwork and quilting, the two traditions, while overlapping, developed differently during the nineteenth century. While patchwork remained fashionable and popular, quilting became unfashionable and less popular, and only survived in some districts of England and Wales, where quilting was pursued in poorer households, especially in country and mining districts.³¹ Patchwork, especially patchwork over papers, was the province of the well-to-do and middle class, a leisure activity, not a craft that was associated with survival.³² Australian women thus appear to have followed the English fashions, and pursued patchwork and embroidery rather than quilting. While crude stitching may have held together some of the cheaply made warm bed coverings, such as the wagger rug and the suiting sample quilts, it is a pale shadow of

quilting when compared to the North country and Welsh quilts.

Local conditions and sources of information would have also reinforced the trend to follow the English fashion. First, as bedcovers were usually woolen blankets, quilted quilts were not necessary for warmth. Wool has been a major Australian export commodity since earliest times, but the wool was usually shipped raw to be manufactured into cloth in Britain. Australia had no textile industry of any significance in the nineteenth century, and all cotton fabrics were, and still largely are, imported. The great American tradition of cotton print fabrics and cotton batting has no equivalent in Australia.

Secondly, as already described, the kinds of quilts most commonly made in Australia were constructed in such a way that quilting was largely unnecessary. These styles of patchwork quilts are similar to styles found in Britain, so much so, that without provenance or overt Australian content, it is impossible to be categorical about where quilts were made. While crazy patchwork originated in America, it is likely that it came to Australia via English magazines and publications. Even when patterns were directly imported from America, such as the Ruby Short McKim patterns in the 1930s, Australians generally made the quilts without quilting them, or by only partially quilting them.

Thirdly, published patterns and directions available to Australian women described patchwork in detail, but not quilting. Late nineteenth century English publications such as Caulfeild's *Dictionary of Needlework* and Weldon's *Practical Patchwork* gave instructions for the kinds of patchwork commonly found in Australia—mosaic patchwork, the log cabin, embroidered quilts and crazy patchwork—but there is little description of quilting. Both publications found their way to Australia as evidenced by the fact that a section of Caulfeild's work, produced as a small booklet, was found in the possessions of Sophia Wilbow after her death.³³ Weldon's needlework publications were advertised by Anthony Hordern, the large Sydney department store. An Australian household guide published in 1894 describes "Crazy Work" but no other patchwork or quilting in the section headed "Fancy Work."³⁴ The Australian women's magazine *Weigel's Journal of Fashion* rarely mentions patchwork in the late nineteenth century, and no reference to quilting was discovered in a selection of

copies surveyed.³⁵ The magazine *New Idea* (called *Everylady's Journal* between 1911 and 1930), which was published in Australia from 1902, made no mention of patchwork or quilting in its first 30 years of publication, although applique was occasionally described.

After 1818, convict women being transported to Australia were given sewing materials including "Two lbs. of patch-work pieces" in order to make a quilt on the long journey to Australia.³⁶ This practice was instigated by Elizabeth Fry, to help improve conditions for the convict women. The motivation behind the practice was not so much to make warm bedcovers, but rather to keep the women usefully occupied during the journey which took several months, and also to allow them to make a little money by the sale of the quilts on arrival. A British parliamentary committee of 1837 commented that "These articles are to be issued for the purpose of providing them with constant employment."³⁷ The emphasis was on the patchwork, rather than quilting which would have been quite impossible in the confined spaces of the ship anyway. No convict-made quilts are known to have survived in Australia, although there is one in England.³⁸

The strong British tradition of whole-cloth quilting, and the quilting of simple patchwork, emanated especially from the north of England and Wales. An earlier study also shows a tradition of quilting in the southwest counties.³⁹ Some British quilting, and marking for quilting, was done by professional quilters, indicating a specialized skill.⁴⁰ Quilting has a long tradition in Ireland, although many quilts are flat quilted rather than padded. The few documented examples of Australian quilting would thus appear to be related to these British or Irish antecedents. However, as we have seen, the quilting traditions did not generally carry through to Australia, while the patchwork traditions did.

Since the mid 1970s, Australia has participated in the worldwide revival of quiltmaking. Without widespread indigenous quilting skills, Australians were influenced by publications from America and Britain, and also by the many women who have traveled to North America and brought back a knowledge of quilting techniques. Thus Australian women have now learned to quilt. A quilt researcher in our tricentennial year of 2088 will have to title her paper "Quilting: its presence in Australia during the last century."

Notes and References:

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6. Quilt in the collection of the Australian National Gallery, Canberra, A.C.T.
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10. Quilt privately owned by a descendant of the quiltmaker.
11. Quilt owned by Miss Fitzpatrick, of Fitzpatrick's Hotel, Westbury, Tasmania.
12. Quilt in the collection of the Red Cross Society, Victorian Division.
13. Quilts in the collection of the Embroiderers' Guild of South Australia.
14. Quilt in the collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia.
15. Quilt in the collection of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, New South Wales.
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17. Oral interview with Dorothy Stevenson, 1984.
18. Averil Colby, *Quilting* (London: Batsford, 1978), 23.
19. Jones, 3.
20. Quilt in the collection of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania.
21. Quilt in the collection of the Wangaratta Historical Society, Victoria.
22. Quilt privately owned by family of the maker.
23. Quilt privately owned by descendant of maker.

24. Quilt privately owned by descendant of maker.
25. Information courtesy Mrs. Elizabeth Plimer.
26. Quilt privately owned by descendant of maker.
27. Letter quoted by permission of Norma Meadley, Narrowmine.
28. Quilt privately owned by descendant of maker.
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40. Colby, 139.