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Australian Patriotic Quilts of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Our quilting heritage in Australia is very British. No matter how hard we try to illuminate the Australian Patriotic quilt—except in a few rare instances—the British Heritage is still there. Right from the beginning, when the English Quaker prison reformer, Elizabeth Fry, taught the women in Newgate Prison to make patchwork as occupational therapy during their transportation to the colony, the discipline of English patchwork and quilting was adhered to. In a letter dated 1832 to Reverend Marsden, the first chaplain of the colony, Elizabeth Fry enquires of the female convicts: “How have the women made their counterpanes, as to the neatness of the work and the taste displayed by them?”¹ Although Australia started as a British penal colony in 1788, by the early 1830s there were also many women in the colony who were wives of government officials, emancipationists, and immigrant free settlers, and it was these women of the colony who had the time and means for patchwork decorative art.

These “ladies” had the qualification of birth and a superior rank by virtue of their husbands’ position in the colony and were called “fair,” “gentle,” “cultivated,” and “intelligent.” These women were not without occupations however. They ran the households (with three or four servants) and included in the household occupations was needlework. “Taste” (as described by Elizabeth Fry) was the type of needlework which was fashionable in England at the time—including patchwork quilts.

Whether, in these early years, pattern books travelled across the seas to the colony, or whether quilts which arrived as household belongings were merely copied, can only be surmised, but obviously most immigrant women communicated with the family they left behind. As Lucy Frost describes in her novel, *No Place for a Nervous Lady: Voices from the Australian Bush*:

[There is] something about the peculiar psychological effects of growing into adulthood on one side of the globe and then taking up life in what must by definition be a strange environment tens of thousands of miles away from "home." Once a life is sliced into two segments by such a move, it feels almost as though one were a fictional character who had got oneself into two different novels. A human desire for unity, for an integrated personality, may make a woman yearn to merge the two novels into a single continuous narrative.²

These women were rather like the early painters in Australia, who painted English trees into the landscape instead of the rugged, untidy eucalyptus, and it was these same women who waited anxiously for English seedlings to arrive, to recreate an English garden in the harsh Australian bushland. And, although the Australian decorative arts (pottery, furniture, silver) began to show indigenous symbols such as kangaroos and emus and native flowers as early as the 1840s,³ the upper class Australian quiltmakers remained firmly rooted to their English origins. The importance of doing what their relatives were doing in England at the same time cannot be overstressed. Thus, until the latter part of the nineteenth century, they made an abundance of hexagon, tumbling blocks, and central medallion quilts.

In 1844, Annabella Boswell describes in her diary finishing a patchwork table cover of silks in a **Tumbling Block** or **Baby Block** design. In 1847, she reports "We are threatened with two conflicting manias, one for fancywork, the other for the Polka."⁴ The tumbling block pattern in silk was extremely popular. It was pieced over templates and was the same technique as the American women were using at this time.⁵ One quilt from this period, made in Melbourne, contains paper templates cut from etchings of koalas and opossums.⁶ The thought of expressing the koala on the front of the quilt would not have occurred to the women quilters until much later.

The attitude began to change by the late 1880s. There had been a vast migration of people to Australia in the 1850–1860s because of the gold rush, and by the late nineteenth century Australia had acquired great wealth. There was the beginning of a tremendous feeling of national identity as over half the population was Australian born. And it was at this point that “patriotic” quilts began to appear.

One definition of “patriotic” in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is “marked by devotion to the wellbeing or interests of one’s country.”⁷ My definition of a patriotic quilt is one in which the maker expressed her allegiance to the colony of Australia by deliberately placing on the front of her quilt symbols that affirm national identity—whether a reaffirmation of her allegiance to British Australia, or simply the inclusion of symbols of either Australia’s indigenous flora and fauna or of her colonial surroundings.

Perhaps the first record we have of patchwork which bears no relationship to the pattern books supplied from England⁸ were opossum and platypus skin patchwork rugs made by the women of New South Wales, which were displayed by the Australian courts at the Philadelphia 1876 Centennial Exposition⁹ and the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition. This kind of skin rug was first made by the Aborigines. Early explorers were interested to find parties of Aborigines in possession of small rugs made of opossum skin and sewed together with sinews, and the rugs became trade items between the natives and the white settlers. It became fashionable for late nineteenth century women to make these skin patchworks also, and they continued to be made up until the 1940s.

The earliest quilts found to date which reflect some patriotism are two which were made in celebration of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee (celebrating fifty years of reign) in 1887. The first contains a backing of fabric printed for the Jubilee, and the second shows the maker’s patriotism by the inclusion of Australian motifs, while she reaffirms her allegiance to England and Queen Victoria.

The first quilt is that of Mary Ann Bruton which was started in the Victorian gold fields in 1873 and completed in 1887 (the year of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee). The pattern appears to be her own, a variation of a medallion design with tiny squares in the center and five successive borders of diamonds and triangles in various combinations.

Figure 1. Detail of backing fabric from Mary Ann Bruton's quilt, printed with a cameo of Queen Victoria together with the rose, the shamrock, and the thistle, ca.1887. Collection of Marjorie Bruton, granddaughter of the quiltmaker.

Mary Ann Bruton was a dressmaker, and the small prints of cotton in the center of her quilt are those materials which were left over from dressmaking and were pieced by the template method. She started the quilt in 1873, the year her second son was born, "patching the tiny pieces by hand whilst rocking his cradle with her foot." There was no electricity and the quilt was pieced by the light of a kerosene lamp.¹⁰

Mary Ann Bruton did not complete her quilt until 1887 when she purchased the fabric for the back of the quilt. The extraordinary part of the quilt is this fabric chosen for the backing, which is a cotton print produced for Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887, printed with the rose (for England), the shamrock (Ireland), and the thistle (Scotland), together with a cameo of Queen Victoria. (Note that the leek for

Figure 2. Embroidered and applique medallion quilt, ca.1887–1890, 88" x 90".
Collection of Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart, Tasmania.

Wales is not represented.) The choice of fabric shows the maker's patriotism to the British Australia of that time. This is possibly the only surviving example of this material in Australia, although a similar fabric has been identified in an English quilt.¹¹ The finished quilt was not stuffed or quilted but is held together by the binding.

The quilt was first exhibited and won two first prizes at the Kerang District Agricultural Fair of 1888. It must have been regarded as an extraordinary piece of women's fancywork because it won first prize for the next nine years from 1889–1897.¹²

Mrs. Bruton's Jubilee quilt is a simple country quilt, but the second Jubilee quilt is a sophisticated masterpiece which also combines the British background and the colonial environment, and was made in the city of Hobart, Tasmania. Hobart was a well-developed city in the

1880s, full of grand stone buildings. The woman who made this quilt obviously had access to the latest women's magazines from England, as all the quilting fads current at the time are included. However, it is most notable for its Colonial motifs. The many Australian motifs on the quilt include a wall envelope containing an embroidered letter which says "Mrs. Blyth, Formby" (the name for West Devonport before 1890) with the postmark "HO" for Hobart (Tasmania). Another wall envelope contains a ticket to the Grand Match—an England versus Australia cricket match—with a kangaroo looking victorious and a British lion holding a cricket bat! Many colonial flags are embroidered throughout the quilt, in particular those for Tasmania, Victoria, and New South Wales. The flags have been dated pre-1890. The center of the quilt shows the Prince of Wales feathers, and the outer border contains very intricate embroidered fans, depicting the craze for Japanese fans and oriental decorative arts. There are embroidered Kate Greenaway figures and a symbol for the Isle of Man which says "Queen Victoria Jubilee, 1887."

The following year, 1888, was Australia's Centennial. Two exhibitions were held to celebrate the event, the great Centennial International Exhibition in Melbourne, and the Exhibition of Women's Industries and Centenary Fair in Sydney.¹³ Although quilts are recorded in the catalogs of these exhibitions, none have materialized so far for us to document. One can only surmise whether, one hundred years after the settlement of the colony, the entrants were inspired to include patriotic symbols on their quilts.

One woman, Nina Alice Read, was part of the great Centennial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1888 in that she exhibited a Connelly sewing machine (Wilcox and Gibb, London). In her diary she says:

In the first week I cleared nearly £80. [The money was made by embroidering names on silk handkerchiefs at the Exhibition.] Singers, Beales and reporters were very interested. They had never seen this work done before or seen a sewing machine like it.¹⁴

Nina Alice Read came to Australia from London on the *Arizaba* in December 1887, at the age of 21. At the Exhibition she met Frank Pigott Webb, a maker of finely engraved and etched glassware, whom she married in 1888. Webb exhibited and won many first class awards for his work, which covered a variety of Australian themes: foliage,

Figure 3. Kookaburra quilt made by Nina Alice Read, late nineteenth century, black and pink satin with embroidery, 50" x 62". Collection of Wendy Lowe, granddaughter of the maker.

native flora and fauna, and which included vases engraved with a kookaburra holding a snake in its beak.¹⁵ In 1894, the couple occupied various premises in the city of Sydney, and Nina supplemented their earnings with fancywork done both by hand and on the Connelly machine. Nina Alice Read made seven quilts, and one of the quilts which survives contains an embroidered kookaburra in the center with a snake in its mouth, surrounded by pink fabric and pink and green embroidery.

The back of the quilt was black and cream silk patchwork, and it was stuffed with feathers and quilted by machine. At last, Australian women were putting their Australian motifs on the front rather than the back of their quilts!

Figure 4. Sampler quilt of the Village of Westbury made by a member of the Hampson family, Westbury, Tasmania, ca.1900–1903, 69" x 88". Collection of Genevieve Fitzpatrick.

Perhaps one of the most delightful quilts with Australian motifs which survives is one composed of fifty-two individual blocks of pictorial scenes depicting life in the village of Westbury, Tasmania. It is pieced, appliqued, and embroidered. Amongst the blocks are "Bobs" the kangaroo, an emu, three colonial houses of Westbury (one belonging to "H.G.J. Drew, Westbury"), a block which shows a candle and an oil lamp labeled "Light in the house" and a multitude of blocks depicting the farm animals, all with their pet names: cows, horses, dogs, pigs, ducks, chickens, and other birds. Children ride horses and a bicycle.

The center block depicts Queen Victoria (in Elizabethan costume) and a multitude of Victorian sayings and proverbs. It was obviously made for a raffle as one block states "Good luck to the

Figure 5. Medallion quilt with central coat of arms by Mrs. Brown of Bowning, New South Wales, ca. 1890–1900, pieced and appliqued cottons, 72" x 90". Collection of Leigh Taumoeftalau.

winner of this [quilt], October 11th 1902." A second date embroidered on the quilt is "January 1903." Another block says "Victoria the Good, 1900." Queen Victoria died on January 10, 1901. It is not known if this quilt was made in allegiance to her, to celebrate Federation in 1901 (see below), or just to celebrate life at that time. The quilt is backed with flannel squares which are machine pieced. The top and back are attached only by the binding.

In 1901, Federation occurred after a long political struggle, and the separate colonies in Australia were joined into one nation—the Commonwealth of Australia. Although an Australian coat of arms was not officially granted until 1908, many earlier items of Australian decorative art incorporate the makers' own versions of an Australian coat of arms. One such example is a quilt which was found in the

possession of the Swann sisters who lived at Elizabeth Farm in Sydney, New South Wales.

The Swann Quilt is a medallion quilt made from salesmen's samples of the late nineteenth century. In the center of the quilt there is a red applique coat of arms with the emu and kangaroo facing outwards but looking inwards. It is different from the official version of 1908 in which both animals face inward. The earliest medal with this particular unofficial coat of arms was struck in 1853 to celebrate the cessation of transportation in Tasmania,¹⁶ but the coat of arms on the Swann Quilt, dated through numismatic origins, is most likely to be from around 1890,¹⁷ (about the same time the fight for Federation gained momentum). This unofficial coat of arms pattern was still in use in 1929 as a crochet d'oyley pattern designed by Playfair and published in the *Australian Woman's Mirror*.¹⁸

The quilt was made by "Grannie" Brown of Bowning, NSW. Margaret, the eldest Swann sister, was the one member of the Swann family who was extremely interested in Australian history and was actively involved in the civic and social activities of the period. She became a school teacher and later a headmistress and, in 1896, was the President of the Women's Suffrage League. Margaret wrote many articles on Australian history and together with her father carried a great interest in the political battle for Federation. Thus the quilt was made by a close family friend, "Grannie" Brown, and presented to her.

After Federation, quilts became much more patriotic and coats of arms and "Advance Australia Fair" appear on several quilts.¹⁹ The most noticeable are a series of four unbacked quilts made by an unknown woman who signed her quilts "MJH." These quilts were made in the early twentieth century. The final quilt, her funeral or final farewell quilt, is dated 1924. The first quilt has "Advance Australia Fair" embroidered in the center and is medallion style. The center of the quilt also contains two aboriginals, one carrying a spear and a boomerang, and the other with a small child on its back. There is also an emu, a kangaroo, and a kookaburra with a snake in its mouth. A second medallion at the bottom of the quilt contains native birds and insects. The quilt is appliqued scraps and appears to be entirely her own design.

Whoever MJH was, she was very aware of life around her. Her

Figure 6. Advance Australia Fair quilt, early twentieth century, made by MJH, applique and embroidery, 65" x 61". Collection of the Australian National Gallery, Canberra.

final quilt shows time passing away by a huge clock, her farewell to the world "God bless you all. Good bye," and is signed "MJH. aged 84 yrs. 1924."

The last two Australian patriotic quilts also symbolize death, but in the form of war. The first quilt is a signature quilt made by Mrs. Hansen and her friends during World War I. Mrs. Hansen's son, Captain Stewart Murray Hansen, fought during World War I with the 14th Battalion in Gallipoli (Turkey) and France. Captain Hansen recorded the signatures of his fellow soldiers and nurses on cotton squares which were used as wrapping around food parcels sent to the troops by the Red Cross and his mother. The squares, signed in pencil, were sent back to Australia where they were embroidered in red silk by his mother, bordered by narrow strips of red material, and pieced

Figure 7. Signature quilt made by Mrs. Hansen and friends, ca.1914–1919, Williamstown, Victoria, 66" x 89". Collection of the Williamstown Historical Society, Victoria.

together to make the quilt. The blocks were sewn onto a backing sheet, and there are several blocks with motifs, such as a kookaburra, a cannon, a dog, a map of Australia, the Victoria Cross, and a flower. Captain Hansen was killed in France on his twenty-fifth birthday. The quilt is a permanent record of men and women who served in World War I, many of whom never returned, as well as being a magnificent piece of patriotic folk craft.

Red and white signature quilts appeared to be popular during both the world wars, encouraged by the Red Cross, either to raise money for the troops or as a record of some particular event.²⁰ The Australian quilts which have survived from both world wars are similar in concept to those made in America,²¹ and Canada,²² and, presumably, England (although none appear to be documented yet). Those quilts

which were made abroad were probably embroidered on muslin, which surrounded the outside of food packages, or from plain cotton sent to the troops or to war camps. In a booklet entitled "What Red Cross Does for Prisoners of War," instruction for senders in Australia included sending "coloured silks and cottons, plain linen or canvas for embroidering."²³

The final quilts in this story are a series of three made from scrap material by the Australian and English civilian women and nurses who were interned in Changi prison (Singapore) from 1942 to 1944. In order to inform the outside world and, in particular, their relatives in both countries, that they were alive, each woman made several signed blocks which were incorporated into three quilts of sixty-six blocks each. In an attempt to ensure that two quilts would reach the Australian and English Red Cross Societies respectively, the third quilt was made and presented to the Japanese Red Cross. An embroidered message was placed on the back of each quilt. The one intended to reach the Australian Red Cross stated the following:

Presented by the women of Changi Internment Camp 1942 to the wounded Australian soldiers with our sympathy for their suffering.

It is our wish that on the cessation of hostilities that this quilt be presented to the Australian Red Cross Society.

It is advisable to dry clean this quilt.

The quilt destined for the Japanese Red Cross and the British Red Cross had similar messages except substitution with the words "Japanese" and "British" and the inclusion of the camp number 2602. It was hoped that if one quilt was given to the Japanese, the other two would have a greater chance of survival. The quilts provided a short list of those women who were still alive in Changi. The blocks on the quilt intended for the Japanese were mainly flowers and pleasant scenes with some oriental flavor. However, the quilts designated for "home" depicted more of the true conditions in the prison and the women's patriotism to their countries. There is a block with a map of Australia with a kangaroo in the center, surrounded by a ship and an airplane; the Changi prison walls; several Changi cells; and a "V" for victory. As well there are blocks showing memories from home—flowers in the garden and in vases, birds, real food, fishing by a river, frisking

lambs, and the cottages of home. Many of the women who made these squares did not survive. But the quilts did reach their destinations.²⁴

Although many old Australian quilts have been documented over the past few years, patriotic quilts, those quilts which reflect indigenous symbols or aspects of the social or political events of the time, appear to be relatively rare. Thus, those patriotic quilts which have been left to us are important to our heritage both historically and visually.

Notes and References

1. Marsden Files, State Library of New South Wales, MS A1992: 551.
2. Lucy Frost, *No Place for a Nervous Lady: Voices from the Australian Bush* (Victoria, Australia, Penguin, 1984), 4.
3. Terence Lane, *The Kangaroo in the Decorative Arts*, exhibition catalog (Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1979).
4. Morton Herman, *Annabella Boswell's Journal* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1981), 89, 125.
5. Virginia Gunn, "Victorian Silk Template Patchwork in American Periodicals, 1850–1875," in *Uncoverings 1983*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, Calif.: American Quilt Study Group, 1984), 9–25.
6. Silk **Tumbling Block** quilt owned by the Embroiderers Guild of Victoria, Melbourne, reference number 382.
7. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 3rd ed., s.v. "patriotic."
8. Many English women's magazines have been found in Australia, and it is highly likely that these were among the sources of needlework and patchwork patterns for women in the nineteenth century, e.g., *The Girls Own Paper* (first published London, 1878) which sold for one penny a copy. These papers were also bound and sold as *The Girls Own Annual*. Several copies, which I own, were gifts each year to Nellie Denbow McLeod on her seventh, eighth, and ninth birthday from Granny and Grandfather (signed Wellington, New South Wales). Patterns were also taken from *The Stitchery Annual* (London) which was the collection of quarterly supplements to *The Girls Own Paper and Woman's Magazine*. The two volumes of *Cassells Household Guide* (London, 1875), 1: 337, and 2: 3, 24 gave instructions for patchwork, as did *Caulfeild's Dictionary of Needlework* (London, 1885), pages 6, 379–385, 414. *Weldon's Fancy-*

work Series (London) was also available in Australia throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As well, Australian-published books of the nineteenth century gave instructions for patchwork, such as the *Universal Self Instructor* (Sydney: McNeil and Coffee, 1883), *The Australian Enquiry Book of Household and General Information* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1894), and *Dawn Magazine*, ed. Louise Lawson (Sydney), which was called the Australian women's journal and mouthpiece, published from 1885–1905. All these publications contained patterns for English-style patchwork.

9. Frank Leslie, *Illustrated Historical Register of the Centennial Exposition, 1876* (New York: Paddington Press, 1974), 259.
10. Letter from Marjorie Bruton, granddaughter of the quiltmaker, January 30, 1985.
11. A similar fabric is shown on a commemorative English quilt in June Field, *Creative Patchwork* (London: Pan Books, 1976), 45.
12. The ten prizewinning certificates (from 1888–1897) are in the collection of Marjorie Bruton, granddaughter of the quiltmaker.
13. *Official Record of the Centennial International Exhibition Melbourne, 1888–1889* (Melbourne: Sands and McDougal, 1890); and *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Women's Industries* (Sydney, 1888).
14. Unpublished diary of Nina Alice Read, collection of her granddaughter, Wendy Lowe.
15. Frank Webb is recorded as one of Sydney's colonial craftsmen. One vase with a kookaburra is currently in the collection of the Nambucca District Historical Society Museum, New South Wales.
16. L. J. Carlisle, *Australian Commemorative Medals and Medalets from 1788* (Sydney: B & C Press, 1983), 5.
17. *Ibid.*, 5–69.
18. Featured in *The D'Oyley Show: An Exhibition of Women's Domestic Fancywork* (Sydney: D'Oyley Publications, Everywoman Press, Chippendale, 1979), 22.
19. In the nineteenth century it was quite common for the words "Advance Australia" to appear under the unofficial coat of arms, particularly on medals, and as crests on furniture and silver. "Advance Australia Fair" is a patriotic song composed in the mid-nineteenth century.
20. Nine additional red and white signature quilts are in the collection of the Victorian Division of the Red Cross Society in Melbourne, Victoria.
21. Several American Red Cross quilts are mentioned in Nancy J. Rowley, "Red Cross Quilts for the Great War," *Uncoverings 1982*, ed. Sally Garoutte (Mill Valley, Calif., American Quilt Study Group, 1983), 43.

22. Some Canadian World War I and II quilts are recorded in Mary Conroy, *300 Years of Canada's Quilts* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1976), 83–4, 94–5; and Sandra Morton Weizman and Elyse Eliot-Los, *Alberta Quilts* (Edmonton: Paperworks Press, 1984), 10, 13, 18.
23. The Australian Red Cross Society, *What Red Cross Does for Prisoners of War* (July 1943).
24. The Australian and the Japanese quilts are now in the possession of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, and the English quilt is owned by the British Red Cross Society, Guildford, Surrey, United Kingdom.