

**Review of Terry, Andrea, 2015. *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums*. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press. 264 pp., 40 photographs, avail. hardcover, soft cover, and e-book. ISBN 9780773545625.**

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and Upper Canada, and the development of technology and manufacture. The patterns uncovered in this research show that iron hardware was available, was not as expensive proportionately as some historians have stated, and that settlers adopted new technology as it became available or as their needs changed, so that what may look at first glance like primitivism (i.e., the use of wooden ploughs) is, in fact, adaptation.

The book would have benefitted from some insight into the function of some items. Why was harness such an uncommon purchase? Because harness was a major purchase that, when properly cared for, lasts a very long time, and can be mended over and over by the owner. Why were implements like shovels and axes, although widely used, not a common purchase? Again, because a farm needs only as many shovels or axes as there are hands to wield them, and because they can last for many years by being sharpened, and having handles replaced.

In truth, these gaps are noticed only because the rest of the contents are so thorough.

The abundance of examples can be a bit overwhelming if one attempts to read the book in one sitting. Rather, this is the sort of book one would come back to again and again. We are provided with many fascinating nuggets and factoids: matches, which had been invented in the 1830s, first appeared in sales records in 1842, with only three purchases being recorded (despite the affordable price), and sales remaining low for several years.

And mysteries are introduced: if matches are available, affordable, and make life so much easier, why were they not purchased? Why do

purchases of oxen-related items only begin in 1861, when the use of oxen was actually beginning to wane? It is not until that year, as well, that the records of cowbells being bought first appear, though cattle had been part of the settlers' lives for many years. The author leaves us to ponder the reasons. Perhaps fashion, perhaps function, perhaps another source for obtaining them.

The common thread throughout is the way in which McCalla reminds us that the settlers and established farmers were individuals with choices to make, with an option to buy or not. In this book McCalla argues that they were consumers, with agency, and that agency was exercised in a variety of ways. They shopped. Purchases were not only of necessities, conveniences were welcomed as they became available and affordable, and people were not all the generalists they are portrayed. In addition, we are reminded of the difficulty (and folly) of making generalized statements based on a few surviving texts (see the discussion on chocolate).

Not only is the book instructive in scope, and generous in detail, a reading of it is a reminder of the ways in which seemingly useless bits of information can lead to fascinating avenues of understanding. In fact, this book begs us to wonder down those tangled byways of life's minutia. Each purchase made, after all, was part of a complex and wide-reaching global economy, and a part of the economy that was being built as the foundation of this country. I found myself imagining the day-to-day life of 19th-century homemakers and farmers with more rich detail, and more respect, than ever before; seeing them as individuals in their society.

## ANNE MARIE LANE JONAH

Review of

Terry, Andrea, 2015. *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums*. Montréal: McGill-Queens University Press.

264 pp., 40 photographs, avail. hardcover, soft cover, and e-book. ISBN 9780773545625.

Andrea Terry has chosen a focused viewpoint from which to examine the current state of public history at house museums in Canada. Her work is based on studies of programs at Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, the Cartier House

in Montréal, and Mackenzie House in Toronto. Two of these houses, Dundurn and Cartier, are designated as National Historic Sites by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), and the three men associated with the

houses, respectively Sir Allan Napier MacNab, Sir Georges-Étienne Cartier, and William Lyon Mackenzie, are also designated as persons of national historic significance by the same board. Terry approaches the history of these men and houses from the perspective of their having been officially and nationally sanctioned. She examines the presentations of each of the houses through an analysis of its structure, static displays, and “living history” programs, the last specifically in the form of Victorian Christmas programs. The Victorian Christmas programs are the longest-running and most successful offer for each site, having been introduced in 1962 for Dundurn, 1965 for Mackenzie, and 1985 for Cartier.

Terry’s work examines how official institutions: HSMBC, Parks Canada, the City of Hamilton, and the City of Toronto, select, curate, and present history to their audiences. She builds an argument throughout that their choices serve to sustain Canada’s nationalist mythology of “two founding nations.” A study focused on the house museum, a beleaguered, and some would say dying breed of cultural institution,<sup>1</sup> is a valuable contribution to the study of public history in Canada. Historic homes are usually familiar and visible within their communities, and often rather dated in their presentations, which almost always privilege elite perspectives. Popular and ubiquitous Victorian Christmases, despite Dickens’s message, focus on the celebrations enjoyed by the economic and cultural elite. Terry does address the tension between the objective of creating adaptive and evolving programs and the fact that for many historic homes programs like the Victorian Christmas are their “bread and butter,” bringing in a significant income in the off-season for expensive-to-operate institutions.

Terry’s analysis, rooted in art history theory, reveals layers of meaning behind the uses of these buildings and associated domestic objects to support the historical myth of Canada’s two founding nations, to depoliticize their subjects, and to reinforce bourgeois family and community values. Her analysis of the presentations demonstrates the power of material culture to shape and direct the narrative it is curated to support, resulting in alternative or conflicting narratives being obscured or excluded. Terry calls attention to the biases inherent in the practice of curation and officially sanctioned

public history; interrogating the role of class and cultural biases of members of the HSMBC, programmers, and on-site interpreters in shaping the message of the presentation. She argues that the house presentations and the popular and successful Victorian Christmases studied are problematic in that they support the dominant elite narrative of Canada’s history, being white, European, bourgeois, and family-based. The programs do not create opportunities to question or complicate that hegemonic version of Canada’s history. Only Mackenzie House, in the context of “global” Toronto, has endeavoured to address the diversity of its surrounding community, and to include that community in creating an element of its Christmas programming. Terry analyzes the impact of the approach that Mackenzie House has taken—the use of temporary gallery space versus the period environment—on their objective of inclusion.

This study begins with an institutional history of each of the three houses, valuable in contextualizing the contemporary presentation, and brings into the discussion the many forces that have come to bear on the contested nature of “Canadian nationalism” in the second half of the 20th century. She links her analytical framework based in material culture with many important cultural studies of the development and use of heritage sites and tourism in North America.<sup>2</sup> Terry’s analysis adds well to this work, focusing on sites and programs familiar to both heritage workers and enthusiasts. At points, however, the argument for consistent, purposeful, application of a nationalist ideology by all concerned—from several levels of government in two provinces, to programmers and on-site interpreters—leads the author to simplify some of the forces at play in the practice of public history. Although the evolution of policy is discussed, the evolution of approaches to historical research or the practice of public history do not figure as strongly in the discussion; so while many of the political and economic factors that influence public history are considered, the theoretical and methodological considerations of the discipline of history are not.

In her conclusion, Terry complicates her sample group by adding the Louis Riel House in Winnipeg, designated in 1976. She argues that the national historic site and person designations serve to “advance the contributions of

Aboriginal peoples to Canada's 'founding nations' mythologies" (163). Riel House is designated for its connections with the Métis rebellions and is presented as a house in mourning, addressing Riel's fate at the hands of the then-new Canadian government. Terry argues that the presentation of a symbolized environment, the historic home, makes Riel into a myth of martyrdom rather than evoking a complex individual; insisting upon only one possible reading of the presentation at Riel House. Terry points out the problematic nature of depoliticized, homogenized presentations of history, but does not allow any understanding of the history presented other than the presumed "two nations mythology." Some examination of community connection with the house museum, or reaction to the presentation, might have helped the theory-based argument in this instance. In the case of both the Mackenzie House and the Riel House, the failure of the presentations (which on the surface appear more inclusive than in some house-museum presentations) to truly include or to problematize the dominant narrative is discussed in the context of theory, but seems placed beyond the reach of the existing institutions to solve.

The study concludes with a survey of projects that contemporary artists have undertaken in the last twenty years to disrupt curated museum settings and to engage and challenge audiences. Terry provides examples of the positive interplay of modern art and history, and of the placement of both forms of expression outside their institutional settings, bringing valuable insights and new possibilities for both art and history presentations. Terry advocates the introduction of art projects in house museums "to promote a critically engaged public spectatorship. Ideally such projects encourage the dissolution of boundaries between the commissioned work, the institutional voice, and the public; they allow for the introduction of critical voices that disrupt commonplace interpretive goals" (175). Overall, this study, its observations, and the potential of such projects should all be the basis for reflection

among public historians and students. Modern art allows artists to problematize and challenge the authority of the curated house museum, a valuable approach to revitalizing these spaces. Such installations might also benefit from more critical analysis, as art too can be exclusive, elitist, or reductionist. One concern I had about the study is that in drawing on such a limited range of sample cases—three houses in central Canada with similar long-running programs—it can only offer a limited perspective on the state of "living history" or house museums in Canada. Nonetheless the author's observations, about the three houses she chose to study, make an important contribution to the discussion of the future of public history and the uses of historic places.

### Notes

1. Franklin Vangone, An Anarchist's Guide to Historic House Museums, Twisted Preservation Blog, <http://twistedpreservation.com/category/anarchist-guide-to-historic-house-museums/>
2. For example: Ian McKay. 1993. History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-1964, *Acadiensis*, 22 (2): 102-38; Katherine M. J. McKenna. 2005. Women's History, Gender Politics and the Interpretation of Canadian Historic Sites: Some Examples from Ontario, *Atlantis* 30 (1): 21-30; and Erna L. MacLeod. 2006. Decolonizing Interpretation at the Fortress of Louisbourg National Historic Site. In Garry Sherbert, Annie Gérin, and Sheila Petty, ed., *Canadian Cultural Poesis: Essays on Canadian Culture*, 361-80. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.