

## *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums* by Andrea Terry

Kate Zankowicz

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[See table of contents](#)

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dwell on the fact that this might have been connected to his father's legal career and political connections, or on the fact that a student with a different ethnic or socioeconomic background might not have received similar consideration.

Interestingly, McMurtry speaks positively of Bora Laskin (who entered the legal profession a generation earlier); he does not mention that Laskin's legal career was triumph against adversity, primarily in the form of anti-Semitism, despite the fact that McMurtry's father was a determined opponent of anti-Semitism and racism. The author's focus on the ills of discrimination—rather than the issue of privilege—might be disconcerting to the young people he hopes will re-engage with his political tradition. This is unfortunate, as the first section's treatment of his family history might have provided a natural segue to this issue, insofar as a discussion of his ancestors' participation in British colonialism in Ireland and the translation of the elevated social status they achieved there to Upper

Canada might have been fruitful.

McMurtry's sorrow about the state of politics and the absence of new conceptual framework for selfless idealism ultimately casts a melancholy shadow over his memoir, one vaguely reminiscent of Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. This does not diminish the *Memoirs*. Rather, it adds another dimension to a set of remarkable first-hand impressions of critical moments in Canadian history (including the patriation of the Constitution), and a perspective on the idealism that made numerous achievements possible. To this, it contributes a recognition that to be human—or even as remarkable a person as the author—is to be limited, such that what is best in us is ultimately fleeting. This impression gives his reflections a classical aspect, one appropriate to the deeply felt humanism that animated McMurtry's efforts.

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## *Family Ties*

### *Living History in Canadian House Museums*

by Andrea Terry

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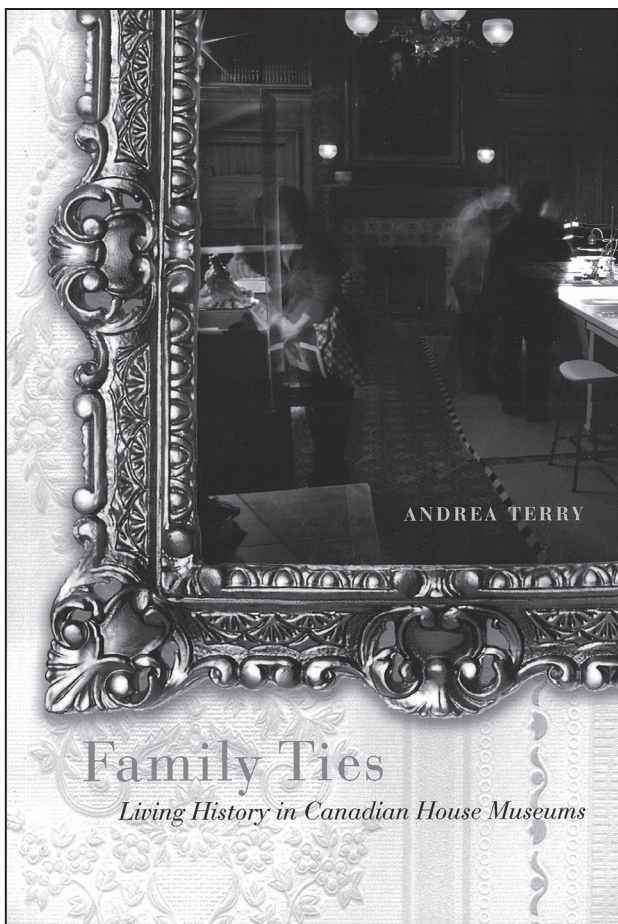
House museums are about more than doilies and table settings. In her latest work, *Family Ties: Living History in Canadian House Museums*, Andrea Terry demonstrates that the re-creations of domestic space in historic houses, although often purported to be de-politicized because of their personal nature, are in fact very politically motivated reconstructions. This book

exposes the artifice of three historic houses by way of their exhibits and their Victorian Christmas celebrations: McNab's Dundurn Castle in Hamilton, Ontario, the Sir George-Etienne Cartier National Historic Site of Canada in Montreal, Quebec, and the William Lyon Mackenzie House in Toronto, Ontario. Terry deconstructs Canadian house museums (one federally and

two municipally run) and teases apart how house museums erect their own particular national mythologies.

Terry's book demonstrates that historic houses are "hegemonic cultural tools" used to foster a collective sense of cultural history. However, whose collective cultural history is it? Terry's critical eye is sensitive to the manufacture and maintenance of dominant white Anglo heritage spaces in Ontario and Quebec. These houses function as loci that are meant to symbolize our 'unified' nation, our nation writ small, in a single dwelling. These homes, clearly, were preserved with a national project in mind, as physical evidence of various 'founding fathers.'

This book brims with details that are the hallmark of careful analysis and research. At Dundurn, enter Clementina Fessenden, first female curator in 1901. She was an ardent anti-suffragist, the inventor of Empire Day and a champion of "Britishness" (37). McNab gets memorialized in a plaque as the "Prime Minister of Canada," despite the fact that Canada doesn't yet exist (47). Cartier, an architect of Confederation, had architects build his residence in the British style to confer his high social standing, but his roof was 'French' (81). Mackenzie's house opened to the public in 1950 and is memorialized as the home of the forefather of the "Fathers of Confederation," a contributor to the nation-building project, despite the fact, as Terry



remarks, that he never saw it come to pass (129) and he only lived in the house for three years. Everything, even choosing to display a turkey on the table in the Cartier home (as opposed to goose, a more English Canadian choice) is drawn into a web of significance.

I also appreciated Terry's analysis of women curators at Dundurn, and how the act of curation, when feminized, was first seen as "keeping house." This section of the book is an echo of the author's previous work on Dundurn, which is essential reading for anyone interested in women and

the heritage field in Ontario.

Her critical deconstruction of the whiteness that is inherent in governmental discourses of multiculturalism was also made particularly resonant through her discussion of “add-on” community participation, or in the inherent assumption of British-ness as Canadian (the colonial messaging of Catharine Parr Trail’s pound cake) (97).

In order to gather fodder for her analysis, Terry “observed and carried out audio recordings of tours, interviews with interpretive staff and admin staff, and spent 6-7 weeks at each site over a four year period (2004-2008)” (7). This book opened up such rich interpretive terrain, that I found myself wanting to know more about the interpretive process and the people who, ultimately, are delivering these messages. We do get glimpses of them, speaking about choosing their words carefully, or feeling conflicted about the Victorian Christmas because they do not feel that they are able to balance the need for historical accuracy with the need the museum has to remain financially solvent through lucrative Christmas tours (7). Her analysis of the Christmas performance at the Cartier site is perhaps the richest because it illustrates the ways in which interpreters at the house make assumptions, do an interpretive dance of sorts, and recall Christian traditions of both French and English Canadians, in both national languages, as needed.

I wanted to know more about who these interpreters were as people, what questions were asked of them, and what they could say about their encounters with visitors. And I wanted to know about their practice. I wondered if interpreters were taking on the terrain that Terry has

covered, reading the prevailing myths of ‘founding fathers’ against the grain and bringing diverse histories into these spaces in other ways (School Visits programming? Community outreach?) Likewise, I wanted to know who was attracted to these sites, and what sort of interpretive deconstruction visitors themselves were engaging in. Visitors have agency; they can and do make meaning in sites that is entirely their own, and based on the knowledge and histories they bring with them into museums. Admittedly, these questions are all beyond the scope of this book, but this work caused me to see afresh how much more time needs to be spent analyzing the programs, pedagogy, reception and visitor experience in heritage spaces.

Terry also deftly weaves in strands about performance art pieces that play with truth narratives in house museums, drawing on Iris Haussler’s work at the Grange in Toronto and other artists’ work. This analysis, in the last chapter, made me wonder how conceptual art might offer a potential interpretive strategy for practitioners. Interpreters can potentially disrupt the veneer of the past by drawing attention to its very constructed-ness in their audience engagement. Could they become their own agents of intervention? In some ways, I read *Family Ties* as a call to arms to heritage professionals to do just that, if they aren’t already doing it now.

As all good books do, Terry’s work raises questions, even as she answers them. It has also loosened the soil so that books dedicated to addressing visitor reception and interpreter practices within Canadian house museums have a place from which to grow.

Kate Zankowicz