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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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The Wagga Quilt in history and literature

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The Wagga quilt fits squarely into the Australian tradition of ‘making do.’ It is constructed from the recycled materials that were available at the time—for the shearer or drover that was wheat sacks, for the poor family on the land it was clothing that could no longer be worn because it was too threadbare, for depression era women it was the samples that tailors or fabric salesmen no longer needed. But Waggas are not only the products of hardship on the land. Many of the surviving quilts were used in homes in large country towns and the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.

The country town of Wagga Wagga, or Wagga, in south western New South Wales in Australia, was a centre for wheat, wool and meat production, when it gave its name to the Wagga rug in the late 1880s. Ideas vary as to how the association started. Rolfe suggests “that the use of bags as sleeping covers may have come originally from shearers who appropriated woolpacks for the purpose. Groups of shearers used to gather in Wagga before going out in gangs to shear the thousands of sheep on the large grazing properties of inland Australia. Wagga was also situated on major stock routes, so vast movements of stock traveled through the district,” and hence, many drovers.¹

Annette Gero proposes that “it is thought to be derived from the Wagga Lily flour sacks made by the Murrumbidgee Co-op Flour Milling Company ... These flour bags were of extremely fine quality, woven closely and warm, thus ideally suited for incorporation into a wagga.”² The Murrumbidgee Co-operative Flour Mill was opened in Wagga in June 1890 and unsubstantiated stories exist that the Mill had an area in their yard where damaged bags were left out for anyone to take and use.³

Whatever the origin of the name, a survey of extant examples today reveals that there are four types of quilts that developed during the late 1800s through to the 1950s that can be called ‘Waggas.’

The first is as described by *The Bulletin* newspaper in 1906: A covering made by sewing together three or four unopened chaff or corn sacks, with a bag needle and twine—made and used by men such as shearers, drovers, rabbiters, etc.—in the outdoors.⁴

The second (fig.1) is a covering made by sewing together opened out wheat, corn or flour sacks as a backing layer, with a blanket in the middle and a cretonne material on the top—either as one whole cloth top or sewn together in sections. Variations include having the middle wadding

¹ Margaret Rolfe, *Patchwork Quilts in Australia*. (Richmond, Vic: Greenhouse, 1987), 96.

² Annette Gero, *Historic Australian Quilts*. (Sydney: National Trust of Australia (NSW), 2000), 85.

³ “Industries of Wagga: Flour Mills: The Murrumbidgee Co-operative Milling Co’s Works,” *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*. May 23, 1893, 2.

⁴ “Aboriginalities: F.H.R.” *The Bulletin*, August 9, 1906, 17.

section made of old clothing flattened out, and cretonne on the bottom as well as the top of the inner layer.

*Figure 1. Cretonne Wagga quilt (detail) made by Mrs Sayers, NSW between 1900-33
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Photo: Ryan Hernandez*

The third (fig. 2) is a covering made by sewing together tailors' suiting samples with opened out soft flour bags or fabric as backing, and blankets or clothing etc. as a middle layer. This example still has the identification labels from the tailor's swatches on the patches.

*Figure 2. Wagga quilt/rug made by Clare Chamberlain c.1930-1940
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Photo: Ryan Hernandez*

It is obvious to the viewer today that often care was taken to create an artistic arrangement of the tones, patterns and colours (fig.3).

*Figure 3. Wagga quilt (detail) made by Mrs Caroline West, Trundle, NSW c.1930
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney.
Photo: Marince Kojdanovski*

And the last transition is a covering made by sewing together dress fabric samples (fig.4) ranging from everyday cottons to evening dress fabrics. This category also includes fabrics reused from the less worn parts of old cloths. Again, care was taken to create an artistic arrangement and variety—often by reversing the same fabric to give this variety.

The third and fourth examples may be seen as variations on the same theme and, of course, there is some overlap and mixing of the four categories. Some Waggas made from sacks in the early 1900s were covered in fabric later—the original quilt becoming the wadding for the new one.

Figure 4. Wagga quilt made from dress fabrics. Note reversal of some fabrics to provide diversity. Private Collection

There is an extraordinary Wagga at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. It was made at ‘Trida’ near Armidale, by Catherine (Kit) Sarah Yates in the late 1930s. Originally, it had a cretonne cover, but if you view it today it is the clothing that has been sewn between the layers of old torn woollen blanket and cream cotton that reaches across the years and brings you close to tears. This one piece embodies the ethos of the Wagga.

According to the *National Quilt Register* website, the clothing incorporated into the Kit Yates quilt includes “heavily darned machine and hand knitted socks, a knitted wool bed jacket, part of a baby’s machine knitted blue jumper, hand knitted baby’s leggings, a number of darned singlets and underpants, a darned knitted pink bootie and other assorted knitted woollen garments and pieces of flannel.”⁵ Each of these pieces of clothing has been scrunched together and stitched down to create the thickest, warmest padding possible and some of the clothing has the name tags of the owner still attached. It appears to have been a covering for a single bed. This quilt, or quilt lining—the description implies that what we see today would have been enveloped within a removable cretonne covering, rather like a doona cover—is a personal and moving testament to the love of a mother for her children (figs.5, 6 and 7).

⁵ National Quilt Register Database. “Waggga: Catherine Sarah Yates”, accessed 28 January, 2019, <https://www.nationalquiltregister.org.au/quilts/wagga-3/>.

*Figure 5. Wagga quilt (detail showing socks) made by Catherine (Kit) Sarah Yates, Armidale, NSW c.1940
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Photo: Ryan Hernandez*

*Figure 6. Wagga quilt (detail showing name tag) made by Catherine (Kit) Sarah Yates, Armidale, NSW c.1940
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Photo: Ryan Hernandez*

*Figure 7. Wagga quilt (detail showing matinee jacket)) made by Catherine (Kit) Sarah Yates, Armidale, NSW c.1940
Collection: Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney. Photo: Ryan Hernandez*

Memories saturate Kit Yates' quilt. Most of the worn clothes are loosely tensioned hand knitted garments, demonstrating Kit's use of the knitting needle as a necessary tool, rather than as a pastime for idle moments. The ten times darned socks and mended knitted matinee jacket have been pressed into service in the next phase in their evolution—to stuff the insides of the Wagga for warmth. Kit and her husband Ern had 4 children—their first son, Kenneth, born in 1938, died after contracting measles in 1939 (fig.7)—some of the baby clothes may have belonged to him. What thoughts did Kit have as she pieced this Wagga together? Did she think about the future lives of her children? About how death could so quickly take them? Is her grief expressed here?

In every stitch of this Wagga the 'make do' tradition of the bush and the city learnt during the Depression years is clearly evident. Use whatever is to hand regardless of fashion, waste nothing, keep warm—survive. Other quilts from this period, possibly made in slightly more affluent households from tailor's or dress material samples and off cuts from handmade clothing, are arranged in aesthetically pleasing patterns, and would have given warmth as well as making attractive covers. The Yates Wagga is purely utilitarian. It has direct connections to the original Waggas of the 1890s and earlier that were made by drovers and shearers to make a covering against the elements.

The people who wore these baby clothes are unlikely to be alive now, yet even though we don't know them, our collective consciousness of family closeness and childhood memory echo in each piece of clothing nearly 80 years on. Many Waggas have not survived the passing trends of fashion and social change as they indicated to the outside world the lengths to which the family

had been driven by poverty. Waggas were discarded once the household was able to make or buy quilts that did not remind them of the hardship that had created them. While some were relegated to be used for camping, as rabbiting rugs or dog blankets others were kept because of the memories of the past generations that they held inherently within them. The Waggas of childhood contained not only the memories of family, but also memories of the weight of the quilt over small bodies, the security of ‘snuggling in’ on a cold winter morning, the arrangement and texture of fabrics on the surface—possibly scraps from the handmade clothing that their siblings, parents and grandparents still wore.

The Wagga in Literature

There are many instances world wide of writers using quilts as a theme or metaphor in fiction and there are many reasons for this, including to indicate a sense of community, to bring a disparate group of people together, to illustrate the vicissitudes of life, to engage memory and memories and as a metaphor for the search for identity. Those novels that immediately come to mind include Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*⁶, Rohinton Mistry’s marvelous novel *A Fine Balance*⁷, Thomas King’s *Truth and Bright Water*⁸, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*⁹ and in a lighter vein, Whitney Otto’s *How to Make an American Quilt*¹⁰ and the Elm Creek series of Jennifer Chiaverini.¹¹ And of course there are many more.

In Australian literature there are fewer references to quilts. The first mention of a Wagga in our literature, that I am aware of, is by Henry Lawson in his story, ‘The Darling River’, written in 1893 but not published until 1900 in *Over the Sliprails*: Lawson is describing travelling by boat on the Darling River as an itinerant worker:

We slept, or tried to sleep, that night on the ridge of two wool bales laid with the narrow sides up, having first been obliged to get ashore and fight six rounds with a shearer for the privilege of roosting there. The live cinders from the firebox went up the chimney all night, and fell in showers on deck. Every now and again a spark would burn through the “Wagga rug” of a sleeping shearer, and he’d wake suddenly and get up and curse.¹²

The Australian novel in which quilts are used in a more significant way is Kate Grenville’s *The Idea of Perfection*.¹³ Published in 1999, it won the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2001. Harley Savage, a part-time consultant to the Sydney Museum of Applied Arts, has come to the small Australian country town of Karakarook to help with the establishment of a Heritage Museum. Harley is also a contemporary quilt maker whose work is inspired by the Wagga quilt. At the same time, Douglas Cheeseman, an engineer who specializes in bridge construction, has been sent to Karakarook from Head Office to pull down the old timber Bent Bridge and replace it with a modern concrete one. Both have been seriously damaged by past relationships.

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*. (London: Virago, 1997).

⁷ Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*. (London: Faber, 1996).

⁸ Thomas King, *Truth and Bright Water*. (New York: Grove, 1999).

⁹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved: A Novel* (London: Picador, 1988).

¹⁰ Whitney Otto, *How to Make an American Quilt*. (London: Picador-Pan, 1992).

¹¹ Jennifer Chiaverini, *The Quilter’s Apprentice: A Novel*. (Elm Creek Quilts. New York: Simon, 1999).

¹² Henry Lawson, “The Darling River,” *Over the Sliprails*. (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1900).

¹³ Kate Grenville, *The Idea of Perfection*. (Sydney: Picador-PanMacmillan, 2000).

Using quilts as a way to link the childhood memories of a fictional character to those of the reader has been used in fiction to convey the love, security and happiness of that time, compared with the unhappiness and struggle of the character in the present. Grenville uses quilts to elicit feelings of comfort and to show the love that Harley's Gran had for her, at the same time reinforcing the dark/light motif in the novel:

But she came to love the sleepout. You were not completely *in*, but you were not exactly *out*, either.

She loved waking up there, under the heavy home-made bedcover Gran had put together out of pieces of the kind of material men's suits were made of. The pieces had been cut into triangles and sewn together in a simple pattern: *light, dark, light, dark*. It was filled with something that made it bulge in strange ways.¹⁴

Lying pinned under the weight of the bedcover in the morning, listening to the chooks waking up and Gran clanging Agatha's door, she could lose herself in the pattern. *Light, dark. Light, dark*. Somehow it was a comfort. Close up, the pattern was harder to see because some of the dark *lights* were almost the same as some of the light *darks*. But even if you were too close to see that the pieces went *light, dark, light, dark*, you knew that that was what they did. You knew you could count on it being there, whether you could see it or not. *Light, dark, light, dark....*¹⁵

As a little girl, she stood beside Gran watching the thread winding through the little hooks and loops on the top of the machine, and the unfathomable workings of the thread coming up out of the hole in the silver plate under the needle...¹⁶

There is tenderness and a protective and secure quality to these pictures of the child under the quilt. The weight of the quilt, the sound of the chooks outside while Gran moves around the house, the 'comfort' of the repeated pattern of 'light/dark, light/dark' on the quilt top, all emphasise the pleasure of Harley's life with her Gran. The origin and emotional stimulus for the contemporary quilts that Harley makes is clear as the memories of quilt/life/sewing machine are irretrievably linked with her grandmother and strengthened by Harley's anguish when her first attempts at making patchwork at home as a child are derided.¹⁷

Later Harley acknowledges the depth of meaning and influence that those early holidays with her Grandmother had, again linking the quilt/life/light/dark theme:

In the back of her mind there was always Gran's bedcover. Every patchwork she made was an attempt to reconstruct the way Gran had put the lights and darks together, the way they had not been absolutely regular, the way the pieces had not quite lined up so the whole thing seemed to vibrate. It seemed so simple. It seemed there was nothing to it.

¹⁴ In Australia the word "chook" means "chicken", a "sleepout" is a closed in verandah and Agatha is the name that Gran has given the wood fired stove.

¹⁵ See Fig. 3 for an illustration of how the dark/light pattern balances itself across the quilt top.

¹⁶ Grenville. *The Idea of Perfection*, 202-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 206-8.

But Harley had found that there was no end to the ways you could put *light* and *dark* together.¹⁸

In another instance of her use of quilts in the novel Grenville introduces a Wagga, an invitation to all quilt lovers, an aide-mémoire to times/life past, to a memory of a fabric or an echo of a piece of half-forgotten clothing. This passage from the novel *The Idea of Perfection* epitomizes what I am trying to describe here:

She reached into the bag with both arms and pulled out a clot of fabric: a bush quilt, pieces of faded fabric over something lumpy inside.

There's Auntie Em's blue coat, and there's my pink dress I got from Farmer's.

She touched the square of pink flowered cotton.

My word I loved that dress.

The back was made up of squares of calico with a picture of a big red flower and the word *Wagga Lily Flour* stencilled on each piece. The stitches had come apart in the middle so you could see what was inside.

Woolly socks were good, Coralie said. Open them out flat, the tops, where they weren't worn.

There it was, a grey sock-top with a maroon stripe.

Everything had been flattened out and roughly tacked down on to the backing with big looping stitches. ...

Once on the sapling bed it looked less lumpy, and you could see how the big piece of *the dress from Farmer's* balanced the various pieces of *Auntie Em's coat*.¹⁹

The play of dark/light that is a metaphor for Harley's life, extrapolates to include all of us. The fictional American quilter, Aunt Jane of Kentucky, observed the connection between life and making a quilt in 1898:

"Did you ever think, child" she said, presently, "how much piecin' a quilt's like livin' a life? ... You can give the same kind o' pieces to two persons, and one'll make a 'nine-patch' and one'll make a 'wild-goose chase', and there'll be two quilts made out o' the same kind o' pieces, and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'".²⁰

Grenville also acknowledges the strong similarities between the writing process and the quilt making process. In an interview in 1999, she described her writing practice thus:

'It is like quilting' she says. 'It is a question of putting together things which don't necessarily, on the face of it, have any overt relationship, or value, but something happens when you put it all together.'

¹⁸ Ibid., 209.

¹⁹ Ibid., 306.

²⁰ Eliza Calvert Hall, "Excerpt from Aunt Jane of Kentucky," *Quilt Stories*. 1898. Ed. Cecilia Macheski. (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1994), 251-52. Eliza Calvert Hall was the pseudonym of Eliza Caroline Obenchain.

‘I am always writing these fragments of ideas down: they fill my notebooks. When I begin to write the book I write them down on pieces of paper, those Post-It notes, and stick them up on the window and move them around and around into patterns and rearrange them until I feel they fit together. Then something extraordinary happens.’

‘The plot and the structure of the book grow into a whole. I allow my unconscious to play with the pieces and, putting the fragments up on the window like that, allowing the material to behave in its own way, the whole emerges.’²¹

and Elizabeth Jolley, another highly regarded Australian novelist, concurs:

I never write a synopsis or an outline.

... I often wish that in writing I could start with the first words and move smoothly on and on to the last words. Writing for me is a ragged and restless activity with scattered fragments to be pieced together rather like a patchwork quilt.²²

When we look at these quickly made, yet lovingly pieced quilts today, we can feel the emotional pull of the fabrics that represent past lives. Here we can see pieces of clothing of long dead but still loved relatives (fig.8), of pieces of fabric from our youth, of clothes our mothers or fathers wore. It is an emotional experience—a link to personal memory and to the collective memory of our society. The Kit Yates Wagga is more than a metaphor for life. It quite possibly sustained life and is a timely reminder of an era when ‘recycling’ was a necessity and not a choice.

²¹ Angela Bennie, “Nobody’s Perfect,” Interview with Kate Grenville. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July, 1999. Sec.Spectrum, 8.

²² Elizabeth Jolley, *Central Mischief: Elizabeth Jolley on Writing. Her Past and Herself*. (Ringwood: Viking, 1992), 10.

Figure 8. *Is That a Sock?* (detail) Diana Mary Eva Thomas 2007

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