

Laura Secord: The Alphabet

BY BARBARA KLUNDER
(LUNAR CAUSTIC PRESS, 2011, \$20)

LAURA SECORD WOULD surely have liked this book. At six inches square, it could be tucked in her apron pocket and brought out—perhaps in her senior years when she resembled the wrinkled, bonneted face on chocolate boxes of my childhood, not the later more glamorous version—and shown to her grandchildren. With the birth of her own third grandchild, artist Barbara Klunder succumbed to what she describes as “the urge to get right to the storytelling” and found the story close at hand in the adventure of her kinswoman Laura Secord, heroine of 1812.

The time was right too: people in high places were noticing that 200 years have passed since our war with the United States. Klunder seized the opportunity to tell a family story, contribute to the bicentenary, and, as an admitted “anti-war troubadour,” make the most of “a chance to rant.”

And so she made an alphabet book where

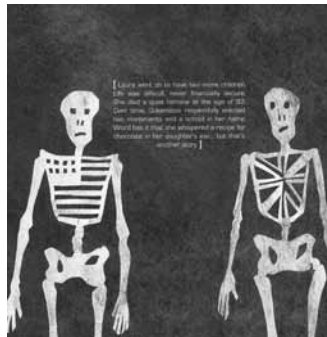
letters get lost in the woods. The undergrowth that blocks Laura’s way challenges us to link text and images in their parallel race across the pages to deliver her warning to the British general. They deliver also the artist’s own gently political message: she does not like war; she does like feisty women; and she wants to recognize the historical roles played by civilians, especially women, and by the warriors of the Six Nations. Alphabet books traditionally aim at children, but Klunder eschews age segregation and invites us all into her playfully serious world.

A mistress of many media, from watercolour to wool, Klunder illustrates *Laura Secord* with intricate silhouettes originally cut from diaphanous Japanese *washi* paper, using a No. 11 X-Acto blade. She revels in the difficulty of the process. The more detail, the better. So the “reader” never finishes discovering another leaf, another animal, another message.

Laura on the cover and title page wears a bonnet with a bow, which on closer inspection turns out to be a butterfly with wings patterned like a Union Jack; at the back of the bonnet, little stars flow into ribbon-strips. The famous cow’s black-and-white markings resemble a map of Canada, and the American captain’s horse wears trappings shaped and patterned like a map of the United States. But these are the least subtle images.



Above, a spread from *Laura Secord: The Alphabet*; next page, details of Klunder’s exquisite cut paper images.



For most of the book, the forest flows across the pages like a medieval *milles feuilles* tapestry crammed with flora and fauna. The letter *L* directs us to a glimpse of Laura’s legs rushing past the upper edge of a picture. Suddenly we realize that the horrors of war are everywhere: death’s heads peeking from trees, skeletons stretched in the underbrush, leaves etched in patterns as delicate as they are macabre.

On the final page, the epilogue is flanked by two erect skeletons, whose pectoral bones outline the opposing flags, because for Klunder the truth is that both sides were “hopeless.” The flags appear one last time as the central crest for the coat of arms emblazoned on the back cover: a lion and unicorn are in their usual position as supporters, but with a skull and fleurs-de-lys above for the French Canadians who also took part in the war, and below, in place of a motto, the words “War of 1812” and a goose carrying an olive branch. All the silhouettes are cut-out against green or black backgrounds, with the cover and title page on beige.

Klunder’s exhibit at Toronto’s David Kaye Gallery in November 2011, *Laura Secord: The Papercuts, the Textiles, the Book*, included a painted treasure box, a decorated lamp, a knotted rug, a knotted wool vest and a “Marathon Dress,” which could be a replica of Laura’s Sunday best except that it too is paper-cut, and its “lace” collar and decorations elaborate on the detailed motifs and messages found in the book.

An imaginative font designer, Klunder enjoys the shapes of letters. *Other Goose: Recycled Rhymes for Our Fragile Times* (Groundwood, 2007) was originally conceived to showcase her B Klunder font, and in the published

version, boldface titles dance in harmony with pen-and-ink drawings. Letters again define *The Animals’ Day: An Island Alphabet* (Groundwood, 2009), her tribute to Toronto Island. She told an interviewer: “I started with the words and made the best little watercolour paintings I could, to show those things.” So beavers bike and kittens kayak, and zephyrs and a zeppelin conclude a zippedeedoodah day.

Laura Secord: The Alphabet is typical of Barbara Klunder’s work: funny, and shattering, and breathtakingly complicated. The limited edition of 200 was designed by Landon Whittaker of Reactor Art + Design and printed by Lunar Caustic Press. A second edition of 1,000 is being printed by Coach House Press, probably to be priced at \$20. It will be available from either the David Kaye Gallery in Toronto, directly from the artist at bklander@sympatico.ca, or from Rodman Hall, the gallery at Brock University, where Klunder’s entire *Laura Secord* papercut show will be exhibited during the 1812 bicentennial festivities in St. Catharines.

~ REVIEWED BY PHYLLIS REEVE

.....

- The War of 1812 bicentennial is prompting an outpouring of printed commemorations. In addition to Klunder’s book, wood engraver and letterpress printer Wesley W. Bates and artist and bookbinder Marlene Pomeroy are producing a broadside in a limited edition of 250 copies; details are available at www.1812broadside.com.