

Out of the Wood

BY ROSEMARY KILBOURN
(PORCUPINE'S QUILL, 2012, \$27.95)

THIS RETROSPECTIVE of the work of Ontario wood engraver Rosemary Kilbourn, complete with a preface by Kilbourn and an introduction by Tom Smart, is an attractive and inspiring work by Porcupine's Quill. The arrangement of the reproductions is visually interesting; it attracts the eye while creating space for Kilbourn's own commentary on each work.

A casual reader will be drawn in by the familiarity of the images. Whether an early work such as the cover illustration for her brother William Kilbourn's study of William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Firebrand*, or a later work reproduced for a postage stamp honouring novelist Frederick Philip Grove, one can't help but feel acquainted with the style. It is as familiar to Canadian eyes as the work of Thoreau MacDonald, but in many ways deeper and more complex.

Indeed, as Smart pointed out last year in an article for *DA: A Journal of the Printing Arts*, Kilbourn is very much aware of her place in the world, and this combines with a rich spiritual vision to lend her engravings texture and layers of unspoken meaning. It has also led her into other areas of work, including stained-glass commissions. The deep well of influence and its expression in a broad oeuvre have allowed Kilbourn's work to quietly seep into Canada's remembering of itself.

The scale of some of the works occasionally overwhelms this relatively small volume, but details help focus the reader's attention on Kilbourn's stylings in such a way as to give a sense of the whole of each. For example, details of *Pentecost* (1962) illustrate Kilbourn's comment that she wanted to show not just tongues of flame over the heads of the disciples, but flames that both represent and are fanned by the wind of the Holy Spirit. "Little candleflames...never adequately evoke the mighty gale that swept the

disciples' fear into total conviction," she notes in the accompanying text. Subsequent details show how her engraving conveys both flame and wind engulfing each human figure, consistent with the medium of the wood. The images are of the wood, woodsy, yet also sinuous, like the fire and wind that could so easily consume it. The images, in turn, consume the viewer.

Some of the engravings fold out in a double-page spread, while a full-scale reproduction of *The Obedience of Noah* (1966) allows readers to experience one of Kilbourn's monumental works.

But what is one to make of Kilbourn's significance? Her legacy is traced through the work of more recent stars of Canada's wood engraving scene, including Gerard Brender à Brandis, Wesley W. Bates and George A. Walker, and this collection allows readers to see the inspiration for their work. *Christmas Rose* (1994) reminds one of Brender à Brandis, Walker springs from *The First Furrow* (1979) and Kilbourn's dynamic use of light and dark, while Bates's jovial and occasionally racy subjects seem to lurk in the many rural landscapes. These engravers live, one might say, from the imaginative space Kilbourn opened for them to trace their own lines forward, and deeper, into the wood for which Canada is known.

This book will allow readers to savour that legacy—and inspire those wishing to extend it.

~ REVIEWED BY PETER MITHAM

Canadian Folk Art to 1950

BY JOHN A. FLEMING &
MICHAEL J. ROWAN (UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA/CANADIAN MUSEUM
OF CIVILIZATION, 2012, \$45)

THIS WEIGHTY, 600-PAGE TOME seems, at first glance, to have nothing to do with the mission of the Alcuin Society. A successor to the authors' previous collaboration, *Folk Furniture of Canada's Doukhobors, Hutterites, Mennonites and Ukrainians* (University of Alberta, 2004), the present volume is an expansive review of folk art divided into 17 chapters touching on

all aspects of life, from portraits and street signs to work tools, playthings, and the catch-all section “Delights of the Imagination.”

Riffling the pages searching for what the publicist might have intended by sending it to *Amphora* for review, I spotted a sign for a bookbinder in the section “Literacy and the Streetscape.” While signs for inns, blacksmiths and other rural businesses are represented, with many suggesting that literacy was as often visual as textual, there are also signs for Chapman’s Book Store in Ripley, Ontario, and Guelph bookbinder Frank Nunan. The shapes of books advertise the stock-in-trade of these businesses, showing that the codex—from the Latin *caudex*, meaning “block of wood,” and later, what we know as the book—was a recognizable feature of Canada’s streetscapes.

Blocks of wood were also transformed into book and document boxes, and pencil holders. There are many examples of these ornate pieces, now largely done away with in an era of laptop bags, smartphones and tablets. The tactile nature of many of these works reminds one of the tactile nature of letterpress printing or, as some of us have been known to do, the hard-pressed writing that leaves its mark on paper.

Don’t look here for fine press printing, however. The most interesting specimens of printing are the examples of hand-lettering on many of the pieces of folk art, each showing a face appropriate to their place and era. The examples of Fraktur—illuminated manuscripts by the Pennsylvania Dutch—as well as legends for portraits and a *Metamorphosis* painted by New Brunswick watercolourist Thomas MacDonald show the scripts that defined the everyday life of people a century and more ago, and both reflected and informed popular taste in lettering.

The artifacts presented in this largely visual book are accompanied by brief captions that highlight the origin, makers and current home of each. A brief introduction and even shorter conclusion situate the works in perspective, as part of a world on which the market has intruded. One senses that the book arts, if they were ever in the ambit of folk artists, are further removed from it now, by the changing technologies of literary production as well as by the prevalence of art supply stores and the like that makes it so easy to personalize

everything from bookmarks to book covers—or more likely, slipcases for tablets and smartphones.

Moreover, with a plethora of opportunities to amuse ourselves to death with online content, few of us have the time to spend crafting personal accoutrements for our literary pursuits. This book documents what people did to fill their time in an era before 24-hour communication.

~ REVIEWED BY PETER MITHAM

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS!

Gary Ackerman, Seattle, WA
Luminita Constantinescu, Vancouver, BC
Jim Cramton, Edmonton, AB
Elizabeth Dajoe Library,
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB
Karen Frederickson, Surrey, BC
Naomi MacDougall, Vancouver, BC
Don McLeod, Toronto, ON
John Maxwell, Vancouver, BC
William Rueter, Dundas, ON
Paula Shackleton, Vancouver, BC
Riina Tamm, Vancouver, BC
Henryk Wojcik, Don Mills, ON



Alcuin Society membership is open to any individual, institution or organization with an interest in the book arts, the history of books, book collecting

and reading. An individual membership is \$50 a year, while institutional membership is \$75 a year. Students may join at the rate of \$25 a year for up to three years. A patron membership is available at the rate of \$125.

Society members within Canada pay in Canadian dollars; foreign memberships must be paid in U.S. dollars. Payment may be made online using PayPal or via cheque or money order made payable to The Alcuin Society, P.O. Box 3216, Vancouver, British Columbia V6B 3X8.