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The Signature Quilt

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The Signature Quilt

Roxy Walsh 2005



Tardree was a long low house with two main rooms on each of two floors, one on each side of the staircase. To the right of the front door was the room that was most used. It was a plain room with a hard floor furnished with a range, a table with a wipe-clean tablecloth and plastic placemats, a sideboard with letters and pictures on it, one or two leather armchairs and a brown painted wooden chair where Uncle Matt sat. There was a kitchen at the back of the house that may have been part of a more modern extension and always seemed a bit superfluous and cold. I don't think that I went more than once into the room to the left of the door, or to the left at the top of the stairs.

Our family home was a 3 bedroom brick bungalow. It gradually grew into the roof-space and into the built-in garage to become a 5 bedroom house with a granny flat. My father designed and supervised the building of the house in 1966 on 6 acres of land that had belonged to my father in the townland of Edentrillick. In the early 80s a hall was knocked through what had been my brother's room to bring together the flat and the house. My parents still live in the house. Now there are two sets of stairs and two kitchens and four bedrooms. One former bedroom is a store, and another is the study. The wardrobe in my brother's old room is trapped there, as the new door is too small to get it out.

After Auntie Dorothy died, Tardree was cleared and sold. In the saleroom my mother found her grandfather's diary from 1895-1897, and the chest he had carried on his journeys to Australia and New Zealand on the SS Guizo during the years covered by the diary. In it the notes seasickness, bad food, expenditure, quarantine at Melbourne and visits to the theatre, moves between different claims, deaths, and the buying and selling of stock. He also describes a lazy summer back in County Antrim and lists letters written home from his travels.

My mother has had an interest in family history since I can remember, and had rolls of paper stuck together in shoeboxes with sections of family trees on them. The shoeboxes were in the bottom of a cupboard in the study that was otherwise stuffed with old bits of fabric and button tins and wool. For years she went twice a week to the variety market in Belfast, buying linens and quilts, bric-a-brac, clothes and shoes. When my sister or I come home from England we are still in the habit of rifling cupboards, territorially, checking what has appeared or disappeared since we have last been.

I was given this quilt in 1995. At the time I had just moved to Newcastle and was to have an exhibition in New York in spring 1996. I included a photograph of it - a cropped detail from a snapshot taken of my mother and I holding it up outside in the snow, with bright blue reflections - in the catalogue.

There was a cupboard in the dining room of my parents' house that for years was hidden by the piano, and it was here that I found the fur boots. They were white sheepskin inside, black sealskin outside, with leather toecaps and tassels on the ends of the laces that danced when I danced in the freezing cold of Saint Edward's Confraternity Club for Men. I had these boots for years in Manchester, in damp cold studios and in overheated bars, until the crepe soles detached and refused to be mended, even at the point of my brother's silicon glue gun.

The quilt was made to raise money at the Connor Presbyterian Church Bazaar in 1896. My understanding is that people signed their names in groups of pews or stalls, individually and in families - sometimes, like Roxaline Manson, more than once - and paid the girls and women running the stall to have them embroidered.

When I cleared my house in Manchester I had to throw a lot of things out. A few things I liked so much that I made drawings to remember them by, but now I think that I have lost the drawings - one of a pair of slippers and the other of the fur boots. Maybe they are in a suitcase in Newcastle, or under the television, or in a bag of letters. Maybe they are in a book that I thought I would re-read, but sent to Oxfam.

The quilt was auctioned in aid of the church and bought by Hugh Jack. It has been handed down through the Bell family who lived at the Barnish, via my Great Auntie Martha and my mother to me. My Great Grandfather, Robert Gawn Bell, is one of the few members of his family not represented on the quilt. As the youngest of twelve children on this 100 acre farm, he had served his time in a shop in Ballymena but having raised money from each of his siblings for the trip, had gone off in search of gold and quartz in New Zealand. According to family legend he might have stayed, were it not that Rose Manson would not go with him.

The slippers were soft sheepskin moccasin booties. I bought them on West Broadway. By the time I drew them there was slightly more hole than slipper, the soles shiny and slippery, one half eaten by a silent South African dog. They returned to New York several times, and were once left behind in anger after the slippery soles and I slipped down the stairs two nights before leaving, breaking my toe-bones on banister rods. The next slippers were not so soft, but they fastened with a zip and were less slippery.

November
Wrote to Martha from Plymouth
To John from Gibraltar
Martha from Naples
Wrote to George from Port Said
Wrote to Jim Ferguson Colombo
Martha from Colombo
Wrote to Martha from quarantine
Wrote to Andy on 19th

During the time our house was being built we stayed with my father's parents who lived in a low cottage about a quarter of a mile down the road, in Aughandunvarran. I don't remember much about this house except the scullery, and my father making toasted sandwiches over the fire in the kitchen. The stile in the wall outside had sand at the bottom and was called Newcastle, after Newcastle, County Down, which was the seaside. When the house creaked someone would always say, *Oh don't worry, it's only old Isaac*, after Isaac Mahood who had lived there before them.

The signature quilt is quite large and vulnerable to damage, and though I have allowed another, finer, hand stitched red and white quilt from the market in Belfast to fray to tatters over the past twenty years on successive beds and washing lines, this one is too precious and particular for that, and is kept, as it has always been, in a cupboard, carefully wrapped in a flour bag that may be as old as the quilt itself.

After our house was finished my grandfather decided to build a new house for himself on land between the two houses. His house was built to the same plan as ours, but without the granny flat. When my brother was first married, he and his wife lived in the granny flat in Edentrillick, but a few years after that they swapped with my granny when she needed more care and they needed more room. My brother and his daughter still live in the house that my grandfather built. Mounted into the wall above the fire is the stone plaque from the school in which my grandfather taught in Backanmullagh.

Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

James Norman Culbert Walsh
Born 19th September 1934
Rosemary Chapman Cairns
Born 26th February 1938
Married 25th March 1959

Roxaline Rose Walsh
Born 6th October 1964
Tyrone County Hospital

Omagh	1964-1966
Aughandunvarran	1966
Edentrillick	1966-1980
Jordanstown	1981-1982
Longsight	1982
Fallowfield	1983-1984
West Didsbury	1984-1989
Longsight	1989-1990
Rusholme	1990-1995
Walker	1995-1997
Battlefield	1997-present
Lambeth	1997-2000
Surrey Quays	2000-2004
New Cross Gate	2004-present

BEACON:
Sense of Place, Place of Sense
Manor Farmhouse
The Green, Helpringham
Lincolnshire 2005