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From Plants to Politics The Particular History of A Saskatchewan Tapestry in commemoration of Kate Waterhouse & Margreet van Walsem

Ann Newdigate

‘Another year, another party’ wrote Kate Waterhouse in 1979 on her 80th birthday in the copy she gave me of the second edition of her book *Saskatchewan Dyes: a personal adventure with plants and colours*. Thirteen years later she asked me to have all her dyed fleece, when she moved to a care home in Kerrobert, leaving her little home in Craik where she had experimented with dye plants such as madder and woad - the dye that made the ancient Britons blue.

Kate Waterhouse, whose pioneering spirit in the crafts won her a lifetime membership of the Saskatchewan Craft Council, was as much a scientist as an artist. She not only investigated dye plants from the prairie, sending away for seeds to cultivate, but always kept meticulous notes concerning the mordants or water source she had used, the time of year that the plants were harvested, and other particular circumstances that would make it possible for her and others to replicate the results. After her book went into a second printing she received a Governor General's medal for her research and writing. The fleece she gave me was classified according to its provenance and the conditions for dyeing accompanied each bag. The following is but one example of the hundreds of Kate's informative notes:

‘This is pre-mordanted alum wool, set in a spent umbilicaria dyepot. It's Sask. so you can use it. Thought it would make the display brighter. This alum mordanted wool opens up a new trend of thought and possibilities’.

Until her husband George's death, Kate had farmed and eventually nursed him, reading a book a day to him after he lost his eyesight. She was 62 when he died and she then decided to complete an English grammar course that was left over from her primary education. She was never a quitter, but fortunately for us the adult education

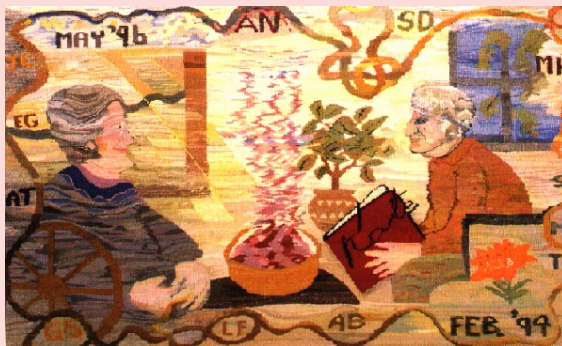


Photo above left: Kate Waterhouse by Ann Newdigate. Two photos of work on the tapestry. Above, detail of *Another Year, Another Party*: Saskatchewan Community Tapestry.

officer in Regina suggested that she would enjoy doing a weaving course more than English grammar. And Kate sure had a great capacity for enjoyment, so she took the advice. However since no further courses were available she then wrote away for information, bought books, experimented, travelled if necessary to study, and all this led to a speciality that took her personal adventures with plants and colours into the public realm. In turn she gave many workshops herself.

What an honour to be given this very special material, but what a responsibility I was also given by being made custodian of such an important part of this amazing woman's work. Furthermore, to do this responsibility justice, the fleece still had to go through the transformation from amorphous, sensuous colour into tight skeins of useable yarn through the labour intensive process of hand carding and spinning. That in itself would then only be a beginning, and there would still have to be many decisions about what to do with it in order to give it the cultural value and form that it deserved.

For about a year I pondered and explored solutions, had sleepless nights, and finally devised a plan with Annabel Taylor, who runs the weaving program at the Woodlands campus of the Saskatchewan Institute of Science and Technology (SIAST) in Prince Albert eighty miles north of Saskatoon, where I live. She had been entrusted with our friend, Margreet van Walsem's equally special yarn after her untimely death. In 1971, when, at the Summer School of the Arts at Fort San, I had suggested to Kate that she put her knowledge of native Saskatchewan plants into a book, she had said that she would do so if I would help her. It was Margreet van Walsem, who was there too, who provided the additional encouragement for Kate.

Margreet van Walsem, whose own contribution to the discipline, and to the arts in general had been considerable, supported the venture in every way, and was responsible for invaluable assistance from the pulp mill in Prince Albert. She had studied theology in Holland before coming to Saskatchewan, and like Kate, starting a second career later in life in the arts. She had learned weaving in the authentic Navajo tradition from Anton Scerbinc of Castlegar, and quickly received a commission to do a major work, *Palaver*, for the Center of the Arts in Regina. When she moved to Prince Albert she saw the need for a support group in the arts, and promptly invited some people, whose work she respected, to participate in a weekly workshop that she voluntarily ran in her own studio. Annabel Taylor was one of the group who went on to make significant contributions through their own work. What Margreet taught was absolute professionalism. She had a way of laughing - not unkind - that allowed you to know you might rethink something you had done or not done. She demonstrated that, within the pleasure and sensuousness of the medium, resided a very serious and time-honoured pursuit. She had, after all, lived through the dark days of Holland during the second world war.

So Annabel and I invited the Prince Albert Weavers and Spinners Guild to participate in transforming the dyed yarn and fleece into a community tapestry honouring the professionalism and knowledge of these two women whose lives had been so different, but whose values were so similar. Happily the Guild agreed, and after Annabel and I had treated the fleece for possible moth infestation, it was parcelled out, and we all spun up a fair amount. The tapestry was to be made in the weaving studio at the SIAST Woodlands campus with participation of students in the program.

On a night in February, 1994, when the temperature was about -35^{°C}, the project started to actually take shape when about twenty people met at the home of Therese Gaudet for a potluck feast. Later Therese consistently did regular weaving on the tapestry to keep it moving forward. At the feast I showed slides of Kate, Margreet, and their work to demonstrate their intelligent and professional approach to a textile medium often associated only with hobbyist practices. To prepare for the designing of the tapestry, I gave everyone a 7" x 11" sheet of strong acid free paper and we brought these back to SIAST the next morning with an image conveying our choice

of iconography for inclusion in the collaborative cartoon. I also brought books with ancient and contemporary images to inspire technical or symbolic solutions.

Working from all these sources, we developed a scaled cartoon in which everyone added their chosen element. This was satisfactorily resolved by the end of the day and, in addition there was also a good firm warp on the loom. The latter had encountered some inevitable tension problems that come from multiple different hands, but these were marvelously dealt with by Jill Couch, who had gained her expertise in New Zealand before coming to Canada. She only participated on that one occasion, but her contribution was most timely. Simultaneously some member of the Guild (who are not tapestry makers) lent their skills to carding and spinning more of Kate's fleece, to ensure an ample supply of material.

Finally the actual process of weaving could begin. Annabel then co-ordinated weekly sessions in which students, Guild member, and a few others met regularly to work on the tapestry. These sessions were preceded by discussions interpreting the cartoon, and often changes were made to the very spontaneous original images, for technical or aesthetic reasons. I went up to Prince Albert to participate in the actual weaving whenever I could. After each weaving session there was a group assessment of the success or otherwise of the day's work. These critiques, tempered by Annabel's quiet humour, ensured the quality of structure and design that were at risk from the range of skills involved. Criticism was democratic, with no hard feeling when some part of a woven contribution was taken out and re-done by someone else. "Too blue" I was told, for example, on a subsequent visit, but everyone could respect the collaborative and exacting interactions that resulted in the remarkable achievement of *Another Year, Another Party*.

It is important to look at the particular history that lay between the Idea of this community tapestry and the culminating cutting-off Celebration. Two years after the cartoon was drawn up the finished tapestry was graciously cut off from the loom by the Minister responsible for cultural affairs in Saskatchewan. The Honourable Carol Teichrob, who is recognised in the arts community for her support and understanding of the difficulties confronting the primary cultural producers, flew from Regina to Prince Albert to perform the ceremonious cutting-off of *Another Year, Another Party*, in a tradition that dates from Medieval times.

The particular histories, whereby any community tapestry materialises, are probably as varied as the people who have worked on them around the world. In this case there was no institution, benefactor, patron, or funding to dictate the imagery. Instead the imagery and construction developed compatibly, spontaneously, and pragmatically, out of a group collaborative negotiation by those willing to donate their time and diverse skills to doing the various aspects necessary for realisation of the work. This history, honouring the achievements and vision of Margreet van Walsem and Kate Waterhouse, has been documented by Shirley Spidla, who also wove on the tapestry, when she visited Prince Albert with me to regularly record the various stages of the work from beginning to end.

In March 1995 when the weaving of the tapestry was about two-thirds complete, Shirley Spidla and I visited Kate Waterhouse at the care home in Kerrobert, to report to her on the happy fate of her fleece, and to record some of her thoughts and experiences with her work and life in general. We found her looking beautiful and reading at the time *Briarpatch*, *MacLeans magazine* and *On the Take* by Stevie Cameron. A committed social democrat, Kate believed strongly in the power of co-operation. Although the tapestry was not yet quite complete at the time, she had the assurance that it would be, and that the enterprise to which she had committed the last valuable third of her life would not be forgotten. She died three months later in June at the age of 96. And at the end of the millenium, a tapestry - the real thing done in a Medieval process which basically has never changed - proclaims that many small gestures can constitute a continuum of public experience and knowledge that lives on beyond our various individual lives.

Because of Kate's and Margreet's acute awareness of the important role of politics in daily life and the arts, it was fitting that so important a personage as the Minister of Municipal affairs should have agreed to complete the chain of this community tapestry. *Another Year, Another Party* had begun, not simply when Kate Waterhouse gave me her yarn, or when Margreet invited Annabel Taylor to her weekly investigations into the possibilities for textile arts, nor perhaps at the potluck feast at Therese Gaudet's home, or even when we workshopped the cartoon in a northern Saskatchewan town, but possibly at the beginning of time when the art of weaving was discovered to be an integral part of the fabric of society.

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