

The Ballybrannagh Quilt

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Down County Museum has about sixty quilts and bedcovers in its collection, including examples of patchwork, piecework, crochet and knitting. Probably the most interesting and unique example in the collection is the Ballybrannagh quilt (DCM1986-271). It appears on first sight to be rather dull and colourless, compared to, for example, the Killyleagh Quilt (DCM1986-301, described in Down Survey 1999). The appliqued figures, letters, numbers and embroidery are rather crudely done, as is the stitching generally. However, a few minutes of closer inspection reveals a lively and observant view of life in County Down in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The quilt measures 62x64 inches (158x163mm) and is made up of 324 squares in an 18x18 configuration. Some of the squares are made of two or four triangles. The design has been made using embroidery, applique and inlay over the basic squared background. The main material used is wool suiting in shades of brown, blue and cream, with occasional use of blue and white puppy-tooth check wool, a coarser woven wool fabric, a denim type fabric and brown velvet. The squares have been joined on the reverse using cream or blue linen or cotton thread. The applique work has been done using blanket stitch and cream thread, and the embroidery is in a satin stitch using cream, brown, blue or grey thread. Buttons or knots of thread and fabric have been placed at the corners of some of the squares. The quilt has been fully lined in linen twill, and the edges finished with the traditional Turkey Red linen binding. There is some quilting at the corners. Close examination reveals that there is some wear and damage; stitching between some squares has started to deteriorate, as has some of the embroidery. It is also apparent that some parts of the design have been replaced.

The quilt has been firmly fixed in time and place by the embroidered text 'Edward Kelly of Ballybranagh (sic), Parish of Ballee, County. of Down, Ireland' and the dates 'AD1849', 'AD1850' and 'AD1851'. It appears to have been made in three sections, with a date in each.

The earliest section (1849) has the traditional child's quilt motif of the letters of the alphabet, indeed there are two almost complete alphabets. The maker has also included a 'pam' (sic) tree, a very cheerful Adam and Eve at the Tree of Knowledge, and a crucifixion scene of great pathos and simplicity. A woman with her hair in a bun churns butter, and a pot or cauldron hangs over a brightly burning fire, while a poker lies on the hearth in front. There is the traditional salutation 'Its time to rise' and embroidered pictures of a black hen, a black bird and other birds and people. The impression is of people, activities and things very close to hearth and home, and of simple lessons in reading and scripture. The maker seems to have been content to use traditional quilt motifs, and to depict very familiar narratives.

By 1850, the horizon has broadened to include the farm and surrounding countryside. One area shows work on the farm, with a horse drawn plough, a harrow, a cart, men with a scythe, a shovel and a spade and a rather jaunty farmer enjoying his pipe while riding along. Another area is devoted to boats, and as well as rowing boats, shows ships in such accurate detail that they have been identified as a brig, a paddle wheel vessel, a sloop, and a full rigged ship. A hunt is in full cry in another. The scene of greatest historical interest in this section is, however, the depiction of a train, complete with driver and passengers, passing over a viaduct. Railways in Ireland were expanding rapidly at this period, and the maker of the quilt recorded this new and exciting technology and the marvellous feats of civil engineering needed to bring the tracks over the undulating countryside. However, it has proven difficult to identify exactly which viaduct has been depicted. The Craigmore viaduct near Bessbrook, County Armagh, would seem to be an obvious candidate, but this was not built until 1851-2.¹ It is possible that the viaduct could have been seen elsewhere in Ireland or Britain or even copied from an illustration.

The final section of the quilt, dated 1851, portrays 'A Procession in Belfast'. This large area shows tall townhouses, decked with flags. There are several soldiers on foot both standing to attention and 'marching at the trail' (i.e. with rifles held horizontally while marching along) lining the route of a procession of carriages, while a troop of mounted soldiers with sabres drawn gallop along. The infantry soldiers have '4' or '44' on their shakoes. The coaches are identifiable as a landau or barouche followed by three dress chariots or closed coaches,² complete with postillions and footmen, and passengers peeping out.

The chance find of an engraving (DCM 1996-24) of Queen Victoria's visit to Belfast on 11 August 1849 provided a likely identification of the event. Although in entirely different media and style, the similarities of content and atmosphere could not be coincidental.³

It is of course impossible to know if the quiltmaker was actually at the procession, though the liveliness of the narrative and accuracy of detail would suggest so. Could it be that, when making the quilt three years after the event, the maker could recall the crowds and excitement, but had to refer to an illustration for reminders of the details?

As the quilt had a utilitarian as well as decorative purpose, it shows the signs of having been well used. Some squares have been replaced, for example in the numbers frieze 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 and half of 9 have been replaced with mounted soldiers. The numbers frieze (below the procession) may have been switched from below the alphabet, which would be a more appropriate position, and replaced with a row of soldiers, themselves more at home in the procession. This and other anomalies, such as horsemen galloping the wrong way in the procession, imply that the repairs were done, not by the maker, but by someone else using figures left over and kept. There have also been attempts at repairing holes and stitching.

The donor of the quilt had inherited it from her parents, and believed that it came from her maternal grandparents. Her maternal grandfather, Hugh Crymble, was teacher in Ballee National School in the mid-nineteenth century. He married Elizabeth Moore of Downpatrick, and both are buried at Ballee. Unfortunately, little more is known about the provenance or maker of the quilt.

There are, however, clues in the quilt itself, and in what is known about similar pieces, which help to shed some light on the mystery. Figurative quilts such as this are frequently signed by the maker or makers,⁴ and the Ballybrannagh quilt has indeed been signed by its maker, Edward Kelly. The false perception of quilting as an entirely female pursuit led to the erroneous assumption that Edward Kelly was perhaps the child for whom the quilt was made. The fact that the quilt is made almost entirely from wool suiting would also indicate that the maker was a man. While wool quilts were made by women, often from pieces bought from a travelling pedlar, tailors also made quilts from offcuts and sample books of suitings. In fact, many of the wool quilts that survive are known to have been made by tailors.^{5,6} It has also been suggested that the technical accuracy of details such as the ships' rigging and soldiers' arms and uniform would be more likely to have been produced by a man.

Figurative quilts are usually made of cotton or similar, non-fraying, fabric. This makes cutting out and stitching the motifs comparatively easy. Wool fabric is much harder to work with, and such quilts as survive the ravages of moth and wear are usually pieced from large squares and rectangles of cloth, or occasionally patchworked.⁷ The use of wool for the motifs and patchwork of the Ballybrannagh quilt is probably unique, and must have presented real problems for the maker. That he was able to produce a work of such vigour and eye for detail is surely indicative of a craftsman well skilled in the use of his materials.

The Ballybrannagh quilt gives us a glimpse of what was important in the life of a man in rural County Down in the years just after the famine. He valued his home and family, and education for his children. He cast a wry eye over local life, and marvelled at the new technology around him. Aware of greater events, he travelled to Belfast to join the crowds cheering the greatest 'celebrity' of the day, Queen Victoria. Was he very different from us?

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Acknowledgements

Down County Museum gratefully acknowledges the generous donation of this quilt by Mrs F Coffey, Crossgar.

Many thanks are due to Les Jones, Museum Attendant, for his invaluable advice on the military and nautical details of the quilt. Thanks are also due to Joy McClean for her conservation work.

Notes

- ▶1. W A McCutcheon, *The Industrial Archaeology of Northern Ireland*, (London 1980) 109, 160, 192.
 - ▶2. D J Smith, *Discovering Horse-drawn Carriages*, (London 1980) 21-26.
 - ▶3. It is possible that the figure wearing a strange double pointed hat in the landau leading the procession is intended to represent the Queen wearing a crown. However, the Down Recorder report of the procession in High Street, Belfast, states that it was led by the Mayor of Belfast, followed by the Queen and various other dignitaries. The Queen rode in a carriage loaned by the Marquis of Londonderry, and research may show precisely which type of carriage this would have been, making it possible to identify the passengers in the coaches. The newspaper report also names the escorting regiments, and research may verify the accuracy of their portrayal on the quilt.
 - ▶4. Sandi Fox, *Wrapped in Glory; Figurative Quilts and Bedcovers 1700-1900*, (London 1990).
 - ▶5. Quilts were made by convalescent soldiers as a kind of occupational therapy, and by sailors. James Williams of Wrexham made a figurative quilt between 1842 and 1852 depicting Biblical scenes and engineering wonders of Wales. It includes a railway viaduct.
 - ▶6. Averil Colby, *Patchwork* (London 1971) 83, 128.
 - ▶7. Janet Rae, *The Quilts of the British Isles* (London 1987) 40, 48.
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