

Down-Under Hooked Rugs

by Lee Pattinson

Everyone knows of the Revolution that freed America, then a colony, from the grip of Great Britain, but not everyone knows of the earlier one in 1775 that had an indirect but very profound effect on another of Britain's colonies, one on the other side of the world . . . the far-off, little-known colony of Australia.

That earlier rebellion saw the northern-hemisphere colony revolting against taking any more convicts from Britain. Faced with prisons so crowded that the overflow had to be crammed into barges moored in the Thames, Britain was desperate for somewhere to dump their unwanted element. Australia—half a world away and in need of laborers to work in the tiny settlements—was the obvious answer. There were some free settlers there already, adventurous men taking a chance on an unknown land, and the bulk of its remaining occupants were troops and their families. It is quite possible, however, that without the convict labor, the colony might have eventually faltered, failed, and been abandoned, in which case Australians today might very easily have French or Dutch as their first language (both those coun-

tries had explored this new land and had earlier made tentative moves to claim it).

It is understandable that in the small vessels that carried the original settlers to Australia, every inch of space was jealously hoarded and no one could bring more than the bare necessities with them, which in the case of free settlers meant essentials such as tools and seeds, food for the voyage and a minimum of clothing, and for the army the varied accoutrements of the military. When the convicts eventually landed, they had nothing but what they wore on their backs.

In those first desperate times, there was no room for anything that might be classed as a luxury—and this included bedspreads, blankets, curtains, and floor coverings. Early days saw people huddled in tents, with reeds and grasses used as bedding—and kangaroo skins supplementing the few blankets that were available. When the first primitive housing was erected, it usually consisted of slab huts with sides and roofs formed of adze-hewn timber slabs from local gum trees called "stringybark" (the bark literally hangs in long, wide strips from the trees). The timber was relatively easy to han-

dle with the tools available and, being from local trees, stood up well to the climate, so was an obvious choice for dwellings. The roofs were tied down with wire (nails being at a premium), and the huts built straight on the bare ground.

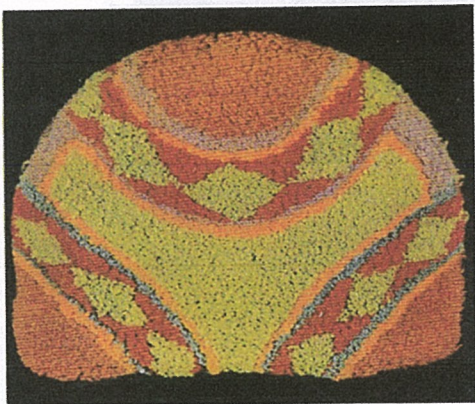
After the first fumbling uncertainty about the survival of the colony, living conditions began to improve and, gradually, more home comforts became available. There evolved three distinct "class" levels—at the top the free settlers, army officers and their families, at the bottom the convicts, little more than slaves in most households, and in between a "middle class," which in itself was rather tenuously divided, some of them being immigrants who had been lured there by the British government's offer of jobs and land, some colony-born citizens, some exconvicts who had served their sentence and elected to remain in a country that might possibly give them a better future than they could hope for if they returned to Britain.

The "upper class"—and their housing—was soon scarcely distinguishable from the counterparts "back Home." The sturdy sandstone and greystone buildings were modeled on ones left

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Women living in poor circumstances, who made do with little, often made rugs with strips of old woollen clothing. Courtesy Pioneer Women's Hut Museum, Tumbarumba, New South Wales



Hooked woolen tea cosy, c. 1930's, a popular hooking project. Courtesy: Trustees Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney

behind both in architecture and furnishings as the owners gradually acquired these. No bare earth floors for them, but imported Oriental rugs in glowing colors or rich, dark traditional patterns that were shipped in



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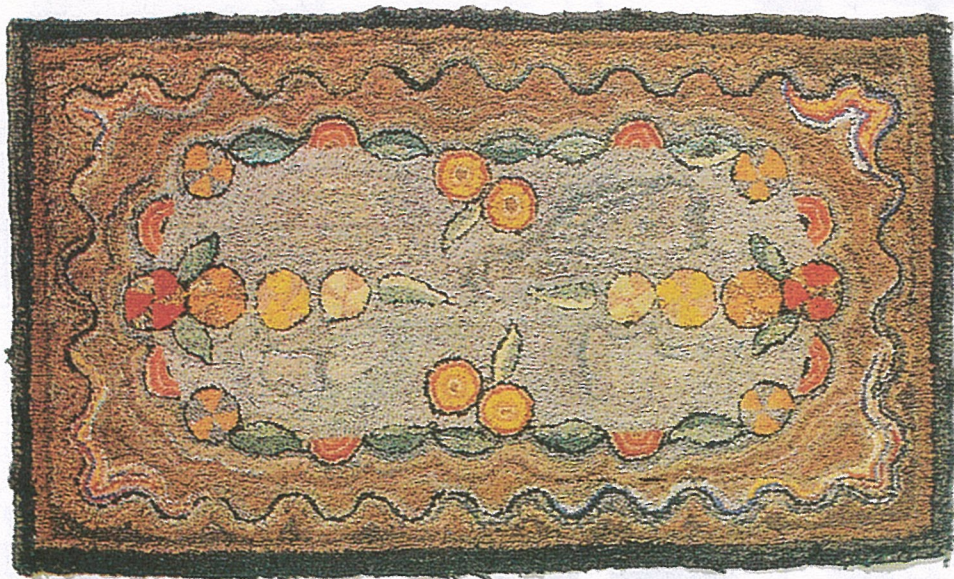
Lee Pattinson herself says she is unquestionably a "dual personality." An Australian nurse with special interest in early childhood development, she was equally drawn to a career in crafts and for some years worked full-time at both—she was nursing at nights at a leading Melbourne hospital and at the same time running a craft and doll shop and producing her own craft magazine. As a side-

line, for 16 years she was also doing a weekly page on advice to parents in a national magazine, in her spare time script-writing for an Australian police television series, and writing *Silhouette* and *Harlequin* doctor/nurse romances . . . "They paid for my daughter's fees at a good private school."

She has traveled extensively and only just returned to Australia after living in the United States for over 10 years.

Her own special handcraft interest is quilting and she has made quilts for her own daughter and each of her three grandchildren, as well as many she has given away to friends. Currently she is supervisor at a home for the elderly and is building and furnishing a doll house to be used in fundraising for them.

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Right top: Sarah Squire Todd, of Tasmania, with her rugs, embroidery and carving. Left Top: A rug hooked by Mary Ransome, her granddaughter, a leading rug maker in Australia today. Left: Hooked rug, c. 1930, Currawarna, New South Wales. Courtesy: Pioneer Women's Hut Museum, Tumbarumba, New South Wales

produced dyes different in shades from those used in England, and an "earthy" effect unique to their new country was the result. One delightful rug made by Helen Ogilvie, born in Corowa, New South Wales, at the turn of this century, was donated to the Australian National Gallery. An abstract done in "colony" colors, it depicts a stylised gum tree rising from the

earth, set in a field of southern-sky stars.

Even long after necessity no longer drove women to pick up a hook or needle, the popularity of making rugs lingered. Many still hold to "rag hooking," in which strips of cloth are pulled through with a hook, though the ready availability of excellent wool in Australia has steered many craftworkers into

using yarns.

One of the country's leading rugmakers is Mary Ransome, who lives in the island state of Tasmania. She was taught rug hooking by her grandmother, famous Australian carver Sarah Squire Todd, and has a household of her handiwork. I spoke with her by phone from her small township and she told me that she finds it a very satisfy-

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ing way to occupy her during the long winter months.

In Victoria, the leading light in the rug-hooking field is Isobel Foster, an enormously energetic woman who lives in the Melbourne suburb of Caulfield, gives workshops in the art, taught Adult Education classes for ten years, and has samples of her work on display at the city's leading exhibition center at the Old Meatmarkets Craft Center. She is almost explosively creative; one of her most recent forays into the world of weaving produced a highly acclaimed cap called "Truganni's Dreaming" (Truganni was Australia's last full-blooded aborigine)—it is on loan to the National Gallery in Queensland and forms part of an exhibit that will be touring the world for the next two years. She enthusiastically encourages her students to reach up and out to produce original, sometimes spectacular, designs, and her own house is a veritable Aladdin's cave of treasures. One steps through its front door (with a large hooked rag rug just inside) and enters a handworker's paradise of rooms filled to bursting with an overwhelming array of materials, part-finished work, looms, and spinning wheels (she spins and dyes most of her own wool), and a bookcase filling one wall that is crammed to bursting point with books on textiles and handcrafts of all descriptions.

Those early pioneer women who huddled over their rugs, working in faint candle- or lamplight, would be pleased to know that the same skills are still being put to use, even in so-different twentieth-century Australia. 🐾



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