

*From Hands Now Striving to Be Free: Boxes Crafted by 1837
Rebellion Pioneers* By Chris Raible, with John C Carter and
Darryl Withrow

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Book Note



From Hands Now Striving to Be Free: Boxes Crafted by 1837 Rebellion Pioneers

By Chris Raible, with John C Carter
and Darryl Withrow. Toronto: The York
Pioneer and Historical Society, 2009.
96 pages. <www.yorkpioneers.com>

P“Prisoners’ box” takes on an entirely new meaning in this handsome little catalogue that enumerates, and illustrates, a distinctive aesthetic side of the Upper Canada rebellion of 1837. Through an inventory, supported by thoughtful essays by Withrow and Raible, readers learn of nearly 100 wooden, hand-sized boxes, carved and inscribed during the spring of 1838 by some fifty detainees in the Toronto jail. Most were prosperous farmers and merchants who had been convicted of less-than-capital offenses following that failed assault on the Tory establishment the previous December, and were now marking time. Their handiwork is like scrimshaw to contemporaneous whalers confined at sea aboard sailing ships for month upon boring month.

Exquisite artwork is the result, and keepsakes from Toronto jail have scattered their way through the generations, held now in local museums and private collections. Half the pages in *From Hands Now Striving to Be Free* are a listing of carvers’ names, transcriptions of the texts, current repositories, Withrow’s photographs, and biographies of the carvers. These people emerge from the anonymity of that familiar C.W. Jefferys drawing of scruffily-clad men wielding pitch-forks and shovels and become real, sensible ordinary citizens,

thoroughly dedicated to justice and freedom. Raible thoughtfully reviews the circumstances, both cultural and political, that generated this artistic outpouring. He speaks of literary sources – Burns was a favourite – and of gift-giving. Both he and Withrow conclude that the uniformly high standard of the craftsmanship suggests a collective enterprise. Specialists in carving, literature, and calligraphy pooled their best talents in what Raible describes as a “collective response to shared grief.” (p 53) Withrow’s essay focuses on technology and artistry, and he admits coming up short on the subject of how prisoners gained access to sharp tools and inks. The whole project sounds like cottage industry in a prison-turned-workshop, and one cannot help imagining tacit support among the guards who may have felt as abused by the system as did those over whom they prevailed.

There is plenty of new thinking here, all of which is stimulus in the continuing hunt for more boxes. The York Pioneer and Historical Society is to be commended for adding momentum to a story that is bound to have sequels. Check your attics, and be prepared for a subsequent edition.

Thomas McIlwraith