

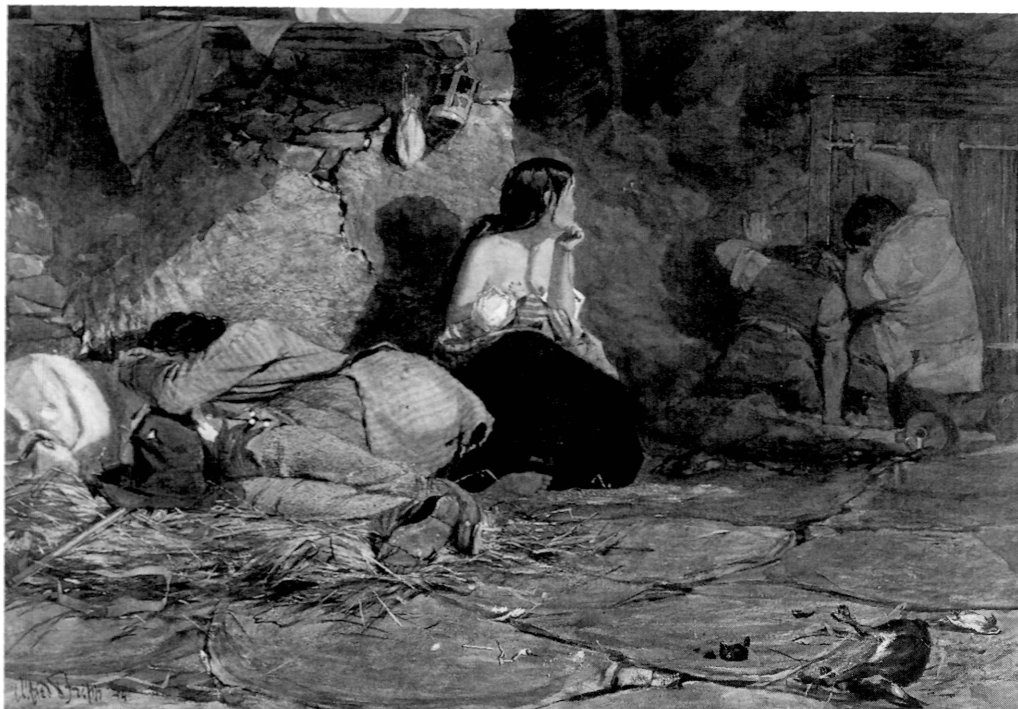
IRISH VERNACULAR FURNITURE: INVENTORIES AND ILLUSTRATIONS IN INTERDISCIPLINARY METHODOLOGY

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This article results from research carried out for my illustrated paper for the Regional Furniture Society's Spring 1995 conference at Singleton, West Sussex. The conference title; *The Placement of Furniture in Houses: The Use of Inventories & Pictorial Sources* seemed tailor-made for those studying English furniture, with its abundance of detailed inventories from a range of rural homes. In the contrasting Irish historical situation one is presented with a number of problems compared to the established English methodology. This article moves on from that conference paper, but focuses much more closely on recently researched pictorial evidence than on inventories. It should be considered as a continuation of the research carried out for the book *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950*, and those interested in further supporting arguments and broader context are advised to refer to it.¹

The simple fact that the British Government's 1841 Census of Ireland reported that nearly half the population lived in single roomed cabins, indicated that researching furniture 'placement' between specific rooms would not necessarily be a useful angle. Furthermore many of the poorer homes survived with dual purpose furniture, which was not necessarily easily recognised or accurately described by those required to draw up inventories. Many small houses (as the cottages were properly known) had beds which were cleverly disguised or gathered up and removed by day. Some of the most frequent confusions of terminology made by those compiling inventories since the seventeenth century still abound today, as shall be demonstrated. Such confusions might have been demystified by quantitative analysis, but the majority of surviving inventories was dramatically reduced by the Dublin Four Courts fire of 1922 (which initiated the Civil War) where such manuscripts were held.²

A good Irish example is the Skiddy inventory from county Waterford of 1640, with its listing of a 'settle bedd or bench bedd contayneinge a flox bedd . . .'.³ The original document was burned in the Records Office fire, but luckily had already been transcribed by the Record Commissioners and in turn copied by John O Donovan. The O Donovan transcription (now housed by the Royal Irish Academy) provides us with a long list without any separation between rooms. It is nevertheless possible to ascertain which section alludes to the merchants' kitchen, and that the house had 11 beds of various values. The settle bed is one of the least valuable at £1, compared to the 'standinge bedsteede' with its bedding, valued at £5 6s. od. Such inventories, however rare, teach us much about enduring terminology, but with small farmhouse inventories the practice of listing without separation into rooms, is actually quite common. Surviving inventories relate predominantly to the so called 'big houses', but they are invaluable for ascertaining how fashionable prototypes for furniture were observed,



1. Alfred Downing Fripp's *The Poachers Alarmed*, signed & dated '44 [1844], pencil, watercolour, bodycolour and varnish (14 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 21")

Courtesy of The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

adapted and adopted for more functional use in the 'cabins' of the rural farmers and cottiers. Reliable interpretation of such Irish inventories must be interdisciplinary, and take particular account of current research into local dialects and etymology. Further inventories have been discovered and published by Miss Rosemary ffolliot in the journal *The Irish Ancestor*.⁴

An important factor which helps account for fashionable designs being widely adopted by the less affluent rural community, is the migration of servants between households. Thus the settle bed, which inventories indicate was used to accommodate servants in the 'big house', was found by them to be perfectly suitable for the confined and often crowded conditions of the cottiers' cabin. Recent research by Toby Barnard shows that the use of servants was not a luxury confined to the rich, but that middle class merchants, such as the Skiddy family as well as farmers frequently employed servants.⁵ Like the aristocracy, such farmers usually provided servants with segregated sleeping accommodation, this was common practice in parts of England too.⁶ Female servants might be given a settle bed to share near the fire, while male labourers were sometimes expected to sleep in 'straw beds', perhaps in the stables or lofts. The widespread trickle down of settle beds into small rural homes provided an alternative to



2. Alfred Downing Fripp's *The Fisherfolks' Home*, signed & dated indistinctly 1849 or 1879? Watercolour heightened with bodycolour (21 $\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ ")

Courtesy of Sotheby's, Belgravia



3. Alfred Downing Fripp's *In A Fisherman's Hut*, signed & dated '44, pencil & watercolour heightened with white (10 $\frac{1}{2}$ " \times 14")

Courtesy of Christie's



4. Francis William Topham, untitled, signed & dated 1848, mezzotint 'engraved [from artist's original] by F. Bromley, published 1849 by Lloyd brothers & Co., Ludgate Hill & Grafton Str., Dublin' (23" × 27¹/₈")

Courtesy of The National Library of Ireland

the common 'high standing beds' or 'tester beds' with their sheltering curtains of straw or textiles, which generally stood near the hearth in the absence of separate bedrooms. It was also an alternative to the common habit of a family 'sleeping in stradogue'; communally on a bed made simply from straw, hay, rushes or whatever was locally abundant, put together near the fire at nightfall. This tradition, surviving into the twentieth century in some parts, undoubtedly accounts for the apparent absence of beds in some of the poorer inventories. The custom was often written about by curious foreign visitors, but seldom illustrated. The straw heap and rudimentary pillow painted in the foreground of *The Poachers Alarmed* by Alfred Downing Fripp (1822–95), is illustrative of this type of fireside sleeping arrangement (Fig. 1). Two more Fripp watercolours depicting maternal subjects show elements which rarely survive, such as the cabin with central hearth, beside which is a straw filled wicker and wood cradle and a nesting hen in *The Fisherfolks' Home* (see Fig. 2). The wicker container beside the dresser in the painting *In a Fisherman's Hut* (Fig. 3) may be the 'earth fast' variety for



5. Anthony Carey Stannus, *An Irish Interior*, signed no date [probably post 1860], watercolour, heightened with white, on white paper (9¹/₈" × 13¹/₂")

By kind permission of The Trustees of the Ulster Museum (858)

storing potatoes, as described by William Carleton.⁷ In both paintings Fripp places the empty wicker potato *skib* in the foreground, suggesting the hunger of the household. He was an accomplished and prolific watercolourist, visiting Ireland periodically and known to have worked around coastal Galway.⁸ He was born in Bristol and based in London, where he exhibited nearly 273 paintings and was a member of the Royal Society of Painters in Watercolours.⁹ Like many other visiting artists he brought the outsider's eye into Irish genre and figure paintings, exploring areas neglected by native Irish artists, for whom the familiar was presumably less inspiring, until the later 1800s.¹⁰ Parallels can be drawn with the literature of the nineteenth century which, when it ventures into the rural cabins, tends to be led by the curiosity of the visiting foreign traveller, more often than by the resident Irish writers.

Francis William Topham (1808–1877) was another outsider, born in Leeds, who was known to have painted in Ireland during visits in the 1840s and 1860s. He began his working career as an illustrator and engraver, subsequently moving on to work in watercolour. At least one of his watercolours bears an unmistakable resemblance in style and subject to one of Fripp's (Fig. 3), with whom he is supposed to have painted in the Claddagh (Co. Galway) in the 1840s. Topham often painted 'peasant' scenes and

gypsies, not only in Ireland but in Spain and was an exhibiting member of both the New Water Colour Society and the Old Water Colour Society in the 1840s.¹¹ Once one has become familiar with the predictable regional placement patterns of furniture within the Irish cabin one can assume that the slope-lidded chest in the background to the right of the hearth in Fig. 4 is a meal chest, as no other slope topped item occurs in the usual repertoire and the meal chest was traditionally kept near the fire to keep its contents dry. Similarly, by process of deduction, the cupboard door (right foreground) probably belongs to the base of a dresser, with its display shelves out of sight to the right. The young woman sits on a stool, pondering the ring proffered by her companion. Above the stone hob seat hangs a religious picture and the inevitable family of hens explores a wicker creel in the foreground.

Unlike Fripp and Topham, Anthony Carey Stannus (1830–1919) was born in Carrickfergus, trained at the Belfast School of Design and then went on to the training School for Masters in South Kensington (with Samuel McCloy) where he is supposed to have assisted with designing details for the South Kensington Museum. He did correspondence work for the *Illustrated London News* and showed at the Royal Academy. He was a member of the Belfast Rambler's Sketching Club and a number of his topographical watercolours were done around Belfast.¹² The location for Stannus's watercolour, *An Irish Interior*, is unknown, but the style of the hedge chair below the window is reminiscent of surviving examples found in Ulster (see Fig. 5). These slab seated chairs with through-wedged legs and back sticks were sometimes known as 'hedge chairs' in Ireland, but no evidence suggests that the contrasting English chairmaking industry influenced their design, so I avoid the misleading label 'Irish Windsor', or others incorrectly applied by dealers such as 'famine chair' or 'primitive chair'. The set of shelves displaying ware looks more like a cupboard set up on a table, with its boarded door ajar, than a traditional dresser (which normally had sides reaching from the floor to the cornice). Presses (as cupboards are known in Ireland) were also occasionally used to display ware, like this, with their doors left open. The spinner is here seated on a stool near the cobble hearth, on her left is an apparatus for reeling the yarn, tucked behind the stone hob seat.

Returning to the subject of beds, in the poorest houses these were the most essential pieces of furniture. There are many accounts of furniture fashioned from turf (solid slabs of cut and dried peat) which in the face of shortage of timber was even used to build entire houses. It is hardly surprising that such furniture does not appear to have survived. A series of illustrated articles entitled 'The Condition of the People of Ireland' was published in *The Pictorial Times* during 1846. By this time the effects of the failure of the potato crop, due to blight, would have already begun to effect the population under investigation, in notoriously poor West County Kerry. The newspaper sent writers and artists together to report on housing. People's living conditions were described in detail, including 'the turf-bed' which was according to the text commonly used in local homes and was also shown in several of the accompanying wood engravings, placed alongside the hearth (see Figs. 6–8).¹³ The hearthside placing is the same as that of the settle and its variants, the settle bed and outshot bed; the illustrations confirm that the long turf bench could be a bed by night or a seat for the family by the hearth. Fig. 7 indicates that it was made up from blocks of turf, used like bricks, using the same



6. Artist unknown, *Ardcara — Cabin of J. Donoghue*, wood engraving (5"×6") from *The Pictorial Times*, Vol. II, No. 152 (London, Feb., 1846)

Courtesy of The British Library, Colindale (F23)



7. Artist unknown, *Ardcara — Interior of Maurice O'Connell's Cabin*, wood engraving (5½"×6½") from *The Pictorial Times* (London, 24 Jan., 1846)

Courtesy of The British Library, Colindale (F23)

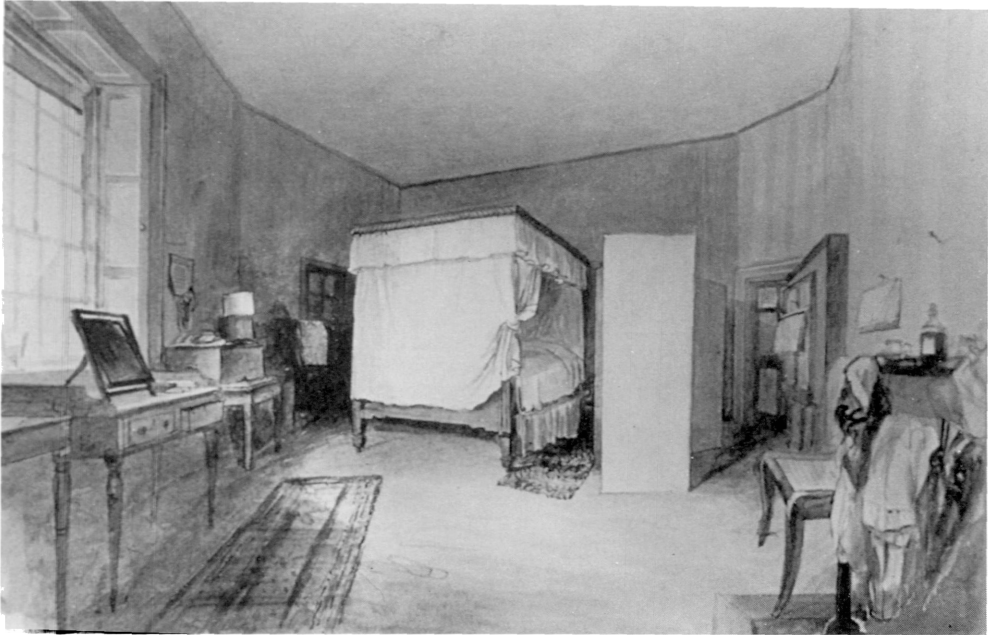


8. Artist unknown, *Derryane Beg — Interior of J. Shar's Cabin*, wood engraving (6"×9½") from *The Pictorial Times* (London, Jan., 1846)

Courtesy of The British Library, Colindale (F23)

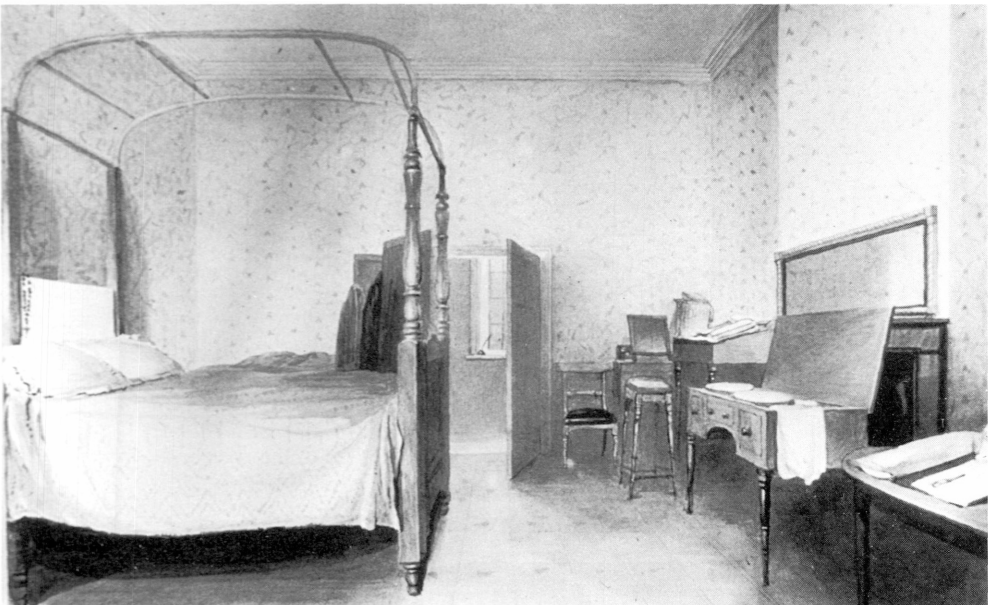
technique that was resorted to for turf houses. One end is raised, suggesting that the sleeper's head was kept away from the smoky fire. Illustrated journalism like this is more useful and reliable than evidence from commercial painting, which is rarely accompanied by written description. This is particularly valuable when studying furniture which no longer survives. A favourite artist/writer team was that of Jack B. Yeats and John Millington Synge whose descriptions of Ireland's 'Congested Districts' for *The Manchester Guardian* combined elegance with erudition.¹⁴ With any engravings it is as well to bear in mind that there may well be loss of detail between the artist's original work and that of the engraver who translates the picture into publishable form. The suspended cradles shown in Figs. 6 & 8 (previously only tantalisingly described by the late Professor Emyr Estyn Evans), swing from ropes fixed to the cabin roof. Now we see exactly how these extraordinary arrangements looked; near the warmth of the hearth, but away from floor level draughts and the unwelcome attention of the animals (Figs. 6 & 8).¹⁵ The fixed wooden crane which is embedded in the cabin wall demonstrates another way of saving scarce materials (Fig. 7), using less timber than the common gallows-shaped constructions seen elsewhere (which were easier to cook with, enabling one to swing the pot away from the fire). Both wooden cranes and turf furniture had an alarming tendency to catch fire, explaining their rare survival.

Another design which must have originated from castles and 'big houses' was the tester or 'four poster bed'. This was commonly known in households that could afford something better than the aforementioned straw bed on the floor. A few examples have survived of the once ubiquitous roofed beds, which had a variety of names according to region, such as canopy, camp, covered car beds, etc. A couple of interesting examples of watercolours from a set of nineteen by Clonmel born artist Henry O'Neill ARHA (1798-1880) show the types of beds which had come into common middle class use and would have been influential in their style (see Figs 9-10). Collapsible beds of this style had already been used in campaigns and Hepplewhite's publication of a variety of 'field' beds reflects what was already fashionable in England by the close of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ Although O'Neill's interiors show comfortable prison rooms (used for Repeal State prisoners such as Daniel O'Connell), they also demonstrate what would have been usual and influential in Dublin townhouses. The 'Traversers' as such prisoners were known, were allowed to entertain guests, which was presumably how O'Neill (who was a member of the Repeal Association) gained access to paint.¹⁷ The shape of such beds was adopted and wooden curtained versions were commonly used in farmhouses throughout Ireland. An amusing illustration etched by J. Kirkwood (Fig. 11) shows a curtained roofed bed that has a curved top canopy, which a range of other evidence confirms would have been quite usual in such farm bedrooms. It illustrates part of a novel by the popular county Tyrone writer William Carleton (collaborating with S. Lover and Mrs. Hall) and is revealingly entitled 'O But I'll lay my life she's away wid herself'. The chapter tells the familiar story of 'The Abduction' or 'An Irish Runaway Marriage' and the open window and rifled clothes chest beneath bear witness to the escape.¹⁸ The clothes chest, known simply as 'the chest' was widely preferred in Ireland to the chest-of-drawers. To the right of the open sash window hangs the rosary and the container for holy water, indicating a Catholic household. The text to the story itself may elaborate on the presence of a pistol and a couple of rifles upon the bed, but



9. Henry O'Neill's *A Room in Richmond Prison, Bridewell, Dublin*, 1844, watercolour
commissioned by Thomas M. Ray (& Fig. 10)

Courtesy of The National Museum of Ireland



10. Henry O'Neill's *A Room in Richmond Prison, Bridewell, Dublin*, 1844, watercolour

Courtesy of The National Museum of Ireland



11. Artist unknown *The Abduction* or *O But I'll lay my life she's away wid herself*, copper engraving by J. Kirkwood (5"×3") from W. Carleton, S. Lover & Mrs. S. C. Hall's *Characteristic Sketches of Ireland & The Irish* (Dublin, 1845)

Courtesy of The British Library (012331f.32)



12. Artist unknown, *Kilcoman — Interior of Tom Kelly's Cabin*, wood engraving (9"×6") from *The Pictorial Times* (London, Jan., 1846)

By permission of The British Library, Colindale (F23)



13. Simon Coleman, title & size unknown, signed & dated 1949, watercolour

Courtesy of The Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin

curtained beds are mentioned elsewhere as good places to hide things. Roofed beds usually lined with layers of wallpaper to exclude dust, were favoured so widely because they provided additional warmth and shelter within cold draughty houses with leaky roofs, and could be hidden by day with curtains. Such beds were considered unhygienic by some and may well have been smelly and vermin infested if not properly ventilated.¹⁹

Roofed beds were common in the poorest houses, where their role was primarily functional rather than fashionable. A good example of this extreme is again provided by the artist and writer team from *The Pictorial Times* (see Fig. 12). The caption below the engraving reads 'Of this place, the room, the only room it contained, was about 8 feet square, and dark as pitch. The thatch was rotting; the cesspool up to the threshold of the doorway, which it required some effort to get through. At one end was a feeble fire . . .' he lists all the furniture as 'a bed, the condition of which could not be ascertained, a coarse deal table, an iron pot, some turf baskets — *et praeterea nihil*'.²⁰ Some actual examples of this particular canted shape of roofed bed do survive, but this is the first illustration I have discovered which shows it in the miserable conditions described in a miscellany of documentation.

Another type of bed which rarely now survives intact (outside folk museums) is the outshot bed. As the name suggests, it was tucked into a niche in the wall, and its



14. Caroline Elizabeth Hamilton, *Irish Fireside*, c. 1840, pencil drawing, from a sketchbook (9"×7").

Courtesy of The Rural History Centre, University of Reading

presence can usually be detected from outside a house by its distinct projection and extension of the thatch beside the main hearth gable. An interplay of disciplines is essential here when pinpointing locations, because architectural historians have already studied its evolution and mapped it minutely, identifying its distribution as predominantly in the north and northwest. Simon Coleman was employed by the Irish Folklore Commission to paint and draw aspects of rural Irish life, so his watercolour of an outshot bed, with a dresser at its foot is unlikely to have been rearranged by artist's licence (see Fig. 13). He kept diaries and was known to have worked in county Donegal.²¹

The comparative lack of inventories encourages a lively interdisciplinary approach to Irish research. The greater number of pieces that can be added to the jigsaw of research the more complete the discovery. Instead of the conventional inventory we must turn to inventories written in rhymes, or lists drawn up in desperation by those needing to draw attention to the abject poverty in some areas. The best known and possibly most arresting of these is 'The Memorial of Patrick M'Kye' of 1837, which lists the meagre possessions of the population of about 9,000 people living in Tullaghobegly, a remote parish of west Donegal. The furniture for this entire area was listed as 'Ninety-three



15. Howard Helmick (1845–1907) *An Irish Interior*, signed n. d., oil on wood (16"×13")

Courtesy of The Gorry Gallery

chairs, Two hundred and forty-three stools . . . Two feather beds, Eight chaff beds, . . . No clock, Three watches, Eight brass candlesticks, No looking glasses above 3d. in price . . ."²² Such privation was extreme, before the 'Great Famine' of the 1840s. However, it helps explain why so many paintings depicting interiors appear to contain little or nothing in the way of furniture other than a few tiny stools. Caroline Elizabeth Hamilton's (1777–1861) sketch; *Irish Fireside* (Fig. 14) is typical of many sparsely furnished hearth-centred illustrations, which reflect a mass of written evidence describing how many of the poorest households contained little more than a few stools.

Her observation of details of 'fine' furniture is also fascinating in her sharply satirical illustrations of Dublin 'Ascendancy'.²³

The general scarcity of Irish inventories necessitates further research into illustrations.²⁴ Leaving aside early photography (which is also invaluable as evidence for furniture design, placement and local variation) we are left with a variety of paintings, which continue to surface periodically, sometimes through the salerooms, and illustrations which accompany texts by journalists and travellers around Ireland. Such illustrations, combined with the study of Irish cultural history and folklife in all its disciplines can shed light on the way things were used in the Irish house. They bring people literally back into the picture, and therefore help bring alive the way furniture was used. Furniture must be seen as a social document. A bed removed from its original setting or a dresser without its adornment of ware loses its very *raison d'être*. The study of paintings can show us how furniture was used within its intended context, yet as with any evidence, many factors have to be considered and care must be taken with their interpretation. An inventory can provide a list, but without the combined study of many other historical disciplines it is a poor witness. Thus we learn from paintings by the American visitor Howard Helmick (1845–1907), who worked in Ireland after 1872, that the many stories of improvised tables are true, as he shows a hearth-side drinking scene centred around a barrel which provides a resting place for jugs and mugs (see Fig. 15).²⁵ One of the chairs that he paints, with its distinctive three legs and T-shaped stretcher, appears to be of the type once typical of county Sligo, but his depiction of the 'Sligo Chair' here (and in some of his other paintings), uniquely, has well-turned spindles supporting the armrests. It can be fascinating to consider a variety of works by the same artist and Helmick's genre scenes repeatedly depict the same curious little three-legged chair with a slab seat and back, seen here in the foreground on the woven rush floor mat. Were these perhaps props in the artist's studio or were they actually common types which caught his eye or occurred repeatedly in the areas he chose to paint in?²⁶ Helmick's paintings are a useful source for furniture historians interested in finer furniture as well, his studies of the interiors of Irish doctors' and priests' houses frequently incorporate pad footed side tables, clocks and what appear to be mahogany chairs.

Interior of an Irish Public House, attributed to J. Noonan, provides some fascinating detail rich in allegory (Fig. 16). In common with many other Irish interiors it shows a barrel improvising as a table, but this time the room is comparatively well furnished with forms, chairs and a fireside table to one side of the partitioned bar (Fig. 16). Like another contemporary pub scene called *The Irish Matchmaker* by Charles Cook, there is some romantic intrigue amongst the assembled company, and both paintings include an apparently symbolic black dog.²⁷ Cook highlights controversy with his depiction of a woman dancing with a red coated soldier. Noonan's shows a white glove beside the dog, the pair of which is dangled by a woman over the head of a child. The woman's controversy is her suggested link with a 'peeler', presumably the owner of the gloves, who lounges against the barrel.²⁸ Over the fireplace, the painting within the painting is apparently of Daniel O'Connell with the repeal document in his hand. The dresser on the left seems to provide a place from which to fill glasses as well as to display 'ware'. The wall-clock in the background would have held special significance in terms of status.²⁹ Specific brewers used to dominate distribution of their beverages in particular



16. Attributed to J. Noonan *Interior of an Irish Public House*, c. 1850s, oil on canvas (15"×12")
Courtesy of The Guinness Hop Store (stolen 1980)



17. Simon Coleman's *Ag ithe na preataí* [Eating the potatoes], signed, 1949, Pen & ink on paper (10"×14")

Commissioned by the Irish Folklore Commission, courtesy of the Department of Irish Folklore, University College Dublin



18. Erskine Nicol's *Scene in an Irish Cabin*, signed & dated 1851, oil on canvas
Courtesy of Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield



19. Erskine Nicol's *Beggar My Neighbour*, signed & dated '55[1855], oil on canvas (12 1/4" x 17")
Courtesy of Glasgow Museums, Art Gallery & Museum, Kelvingrove



20. Erskine Nicol's *A Tablespoonful three times a day*, signed & dated 1868, oil on canvas (19"×15")

Courtesy of The Gorry Gallery, Dublin

regions in the nineteenth century, so research into brewery archives can help ascertain locations, as labelled barrels are often depicted. There is a school of thought that maintains that naïve painters were more likely to paint what was before them instead of using artistic licence, which more experienced painters perhaps tended to do for commercial reasons, to improve composition and add interest.



21. James Brenan's *Letter from America*, oil on canvas, signed & dated 1875 (32"×36")

Courtesy of The Crawford Municipal Art Gallery

The documents gathered as part of the truncated Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland (begun in the 1830's but never completed) can be loosely classed as inventories and are a valuable source. In some a special problem of decoding is posed, as the Government commissioners, presumably finding similar furniture in most of the cottiers' houses of Tamlaght Parish, county Tyrone, resorted to a lazy system of letter codes to list the contents of each house. Unfortunately for us no key to the code has been discovered, so it is open to interpretation but seems likely that the following letters can be interpreted thus; d = dresser, t = table, c = chair, s = settle bed, ew = earthenware, tn = tinware and tc = ticking clock.³⁰ These terms have been interpreted by Angélique Day, who has been transcribing and publishing the memoirs over the past few years. Her interpretation of tc to mean ticking clock is intriguing and doubtless based on study of dialect as well as the many other notes that appear amongst the memoirs. Clocks were a comparative luxury, especially before the import of mass produced Connecticut clocks which made their appearance in the Great Exhibition of 1851. The Commissioners recording housing

conditions for the Parish of Racavan, county Antrim in 1835 observed that the inhabitants' 'great ambition is a clock, which many of them possess. It is always termed "she" and there is general[ly] a carousel or merry-making at the "setting up of her".'³¹

The subject of tables in Irish history is an intriguing one, like the study of beds one is tempted to begin by describing the absence of them. Luke Gernon, wrote of the inside of a tower house in 1620 '... the wild Irish have no candles on their tables — What! Do I speak of tables? Indeed they have no tables, but set their meat upon a bundle of grass . . .'³² Although well documented by written descriptions, few illustrations have been discovered which shows us Ireland's traditional alternatives to tables. Simon Coleman's workmanlike drawing of 1949 *Ag ithe na Preataí* [Eating the Potatoes], showing a comfortable farm interior from central Donegal (Fig. 17).³³ The tradition of straining the potatoes through a wicker *skib*, from which they were then eaten, is still described by those old enough to remember it, but Coleman's task to record such aspects of folklife means that we have a reliable depiction of a custom which did not interest other artists. Sometimes the *skib* would be balanced on a stool, or on the three-legged pot in which the potatoes had been cooked, or here as drawn by Coleman, raised upon a 'dash churn' around which the household are seated. Alternatively the *skib* was simply balanced on the knees of those sharing the meal. What is perhaps most remarkable is the sturdy rectangular table shown in the background of Coleman's study, which has been rejected as the centrepiece for the meal, in favour of the time honoured shared basket.

Another prolific painter who made frequent visits to Ireland was Erskine Nicol, R.S.A., A.R.A. (1825–1904), whose style is said to have been influenced by that of David Wilkie. Nicol's favouring of genre scenes, portraits and comic portrayal of Irish rural life makes him a useful name to follow when searching for depictions of Irish vernacular furniture. His paintings occasionally resort to simian physiognomy when showing 'Paddy' at home. However distasteful to today's audience, the Victorians were quite accustomed to such ape-like images from the pages of *Punch* which frequently showed the Irish 'characters' as figures of fun.

It is only when a collection of a few paintings by someone like Nicol are examined as a group that one can begin to observe revealing traits about how he worked. With the first two paintings published here, we can see Nicol working over a favourite theme of the mealtime. His *Scene in an Irish Cabin* (Fig. 18) of 1851 is closely similar to several other paintings of his with groups of four or five figures, usually centred on the same stool/low table from which food is being served.³⁴ Nicol evidently painted some of the same favourite figures repeatedly as well as small items of furniture which either appeared as common local types in the houses in which he worked, or were perhaps part of a studio collection? His mealtime scenes are nevertheless a useful way of visualising how people ate, because they correspond so closely to numerous written descriptions of these events as well as with surviving examples of the furniture itself. Such discoveries only help emphasise the constant need to cross refer across a variety of different disciplines.

Nicol produced an impressive list of titles which were exhibited in the Royal Academy and elsewhere. The temptation to rework old scenes must have been strong to feed the hungry London and Scottish markets. The lists of his exhibited titles such as *The Shebeen House* (1858) and *No Place Like Home* (1887) suggest that many more of



THE TRAVELLING MAN.

Jack B. Yeats.

22. Jack B. Yeats' *The Travelling Man*, signed. Pen & ink, published in *The Shanachie*, Dublin, 1906 (26"×19")

By kind permission of Anne Yeats & of The British Library (C.127.d.1)

Nicol's Irish interiors are yet to be discovered.³⁵ *Beggar My Neighbour* (Fig. 19) shows another convivial group of figures gathered around the low stool, playing cards and sharing many features familiar from his *A Card Party*.³⁶ In his interiors Nicol often paints *síugán* chairs, a type which were widely used in the west of Ireland and distinguished by their seats of twisted straw or hay rope, wound around a wooden chair frame. One has to exercise caution when researching seating and distinguishing *síugán* chairs from the other common variety which is made entirely from straw, because both types were often referred to simply as 'straw chairs'. Nicol shows one of the coiled and bound straw seats in *Beggar My Neighbour* (1855), to the left of which is the high backed *síugán* variety (see Fig. 19). The fragility and resultant rarity of the coiled straw seats (which documentary research has proved to have been widely used), means that such paintings put these 'bosses' in context and also help shed light on the wide range of shapes to which the straw workers resorted. Object analysis of the few left in museum collections shows that some had rudimentary wooden supports beneath the seats, while others were stuffed full of more straw or hay.³⁷ Nicol shows the symbolic potato *skib* on the left hand side of this painting and like many other artists seems to juggle with the usual layout of the 'long low house' using his artist's licence to achieve a pleasing composition.

The third oil by Nicol, *A Tablespoon three times a day* (1868) gives a nice example of a country chair with pierced splat back, doubtless inspired by the mahogany examples made after publication in the 1750s and 60s of Chippendale's *Director*³⁸ (see Fig. 20). As discussed, the wall clock with its long pendulum would also have been a cherished symbol of conspicuous consumption. On the scrubbed table top the artist shows the ubiquitous blue and white spongeware 'basin' which was used for everything from eating potatoes to drinking tea. Tables were traditionally placed beneath the light of a window and Nicol here has bags of belongings hung on the wall and a small framed mirror propped up on the sill, in the same way as in some of his other paintings.

James Brenan R.H.A. (1837–1904) is one of the few native Irish artists whose work is reproduced here, to have ventured indoors to give us a glimpse of interiors which are probably from county Cork. He was Headmaster of the Cork School of Art and a few of his paintings of interiors survive depicting such rare items as fireside hen coops and the display of hanging spoons on a dresser.³⁹ In *Letter from America* a young barefoot woman reads aloud a letter to her family, perhaps sent from an exiled relative who left with the exodus of millions of emigrants fleeing Ireland during and after the famine years. The group are gathered around a table with through tenoned stretchers linking the legs, which perhaps uncharacteristically is not in its customary place against the wall. In the background a man ponders the news as he sits by the fire, his back to a panelled settle. A mirror reflects light on its place on the window sill (see Fig. 21) and a hen makes her way towards the feeding trough on the earthen floor.

Jack B. Yeats (1871–1957) has been hailed as 'without doubt, the greatest Irish artist of the first half of the twentieth century'.⁴⁰ In *The Travelling Man* (Fig. 22), the layout accords closely to known traditions of placement of furniture; the table is naturally lit by the front window (whilst providing one with a glimpse of approaching visitors) and the dresser, with its jugs and mugs dangling from the shelf fronts, is in the right place to reflect the light from a gable hearth. The two figures are engaged in some sort of game



23. Cornelius Varley's *Interior of a House*, signed, pencil on paper, c. 1808 (12 1/2" x 14")

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on the flagged floor. Yeats claimed more than once that a picture was a way of viewing life, comparing it with a window, through which life may be seen framed.⁴¹ Tantalisingly few of Yeats' many Irish 'cartoons' involve furnished interiors, but some of the most useful are the ones already mentioned, in tandem with Synge for *The Manchester Guardian*. Such close conjunction of written and illustrated journalistic reports is obviously one of the most reliable forms of illustrated evidence, although except in the



24. Attr. to William Bourke Kirwan, untitled Irish interior, unsigned, c. 1840s, watercolour (5'1/2" x 9'1/4")

case of J. B. Yeats, it is rarely the most aesthetically pleasing. This work and Yeats's enthusiasm for rural Irish culture help make his illustrations particularly useful.

The finely detailed outline drawing by the visiting Cornelius Varley (1781–1873) of *Interior of a House* (Fig. 23), is thought to have been done in Markethill, central county Armagh, which he is known to have visited when travelling from Kerry to Armagh.⁴² More detailed research into the local variations of spinning wheel design would help narrow down such illustrations to specific regions (see, for instance, Fig. 4). The nicely cut out 'cupid's bow' motif on the edge of the table is typical of Irish furniture makers' ability to decorate by removing rather than adding material, although this lightweight example with odd legs is unusual. Varley's attention to detail is especially interesting here with regard to the chair, which with its straight back and multiple stretchers defies classification into any common type, but looks old and mended. The staved vessel on the table is a 'piggin', generally used to hold milk or water and similar to its Scottish counterpart the 'luggie', also with a projecting stave handle. Smaller versions for drinking out of were called noggins and both crop up frequently in inventories indicating widespread use across the social scale. It is interesting to compare these with the broad based coopered vessel shown by Topham (Fig. 4) which has a carrying rope and an inner rim to prevent water spilling. Varley also shows a container beneath the table, where its contents were sheltered from detritus which might fall from an unlined thatched roof above. Irish tables typically incorporated double stretchers linking the legs, so such containers of food could be raised a few inches above the floor, at the same time as

strengthening the legs. The little board ended stool in the corner is a type that occurs commonly throughout Ireland.

A decidedly less romantic character, that of William Bourke Kirwan (b. 1814–dd. after 1852) achieved notoriety by murdering his wife, a crime for which he was sentenced to transportation to America for life, in 1852.⁴³ His watercolours are of interest here because at least one demonstrates a rare observation for the colourful furniture and furnishings of a well equipped kitchen (see Fig. 24). We need to use detective work to help locate the scene, working on the reasonable assumption that the artifacts reflect local tradition. Thus the open based or fiddle front type of dresser, apparently with sledge feet, suggests an area in the northern/northwestern districts rather than from southern counties. The type of flat griddle suspended over the fire would reinforce the northerly assumption, as the making of griddle cakes is uncommon in the south and the bundles of nets kept in the rafters prompts the possibility of the house being in a lakeside or coastal area. The spinning wheel is of the ‘castle’ type rather than the ‘low Irish type’, making a northerly rather than westerly location likely.⁴⁴ Not enough features of this house are revealed to make classification via architectural type possible, although more work has probably been done on history and distribution patterns of vernacular Irish house types than on any other aspect of Ireland’s material culture.⁴⁵

This sort of detective work, combining the detailed work published from a broad range of different disciplines, helps fill in the missing links of identification and location. Such interdisciplinary study, embracing subjects as diverse as the distribution of rope twistors and types of turf slane, appears in scholarly journals such as *Folk Life*. This article has touched on a few artists whose work has not previously been used as evidence for furniture historians, as well as adding to the list of titles by those such as Erskine Nicol who have already emerged as useful artistic witnesses. It is vital to handle any historical evidence with care, but a keen eye and cross reference to other disciplines, combined with awareness of artists’ working practices, can make paintings one of the most exciting sources to work with. Hopefully, as a result, more of the many ‘lost’ paintings by this selection of artists will come to light, and any suggestions from readers as to their scattered whereabouts would be warmly welcomed.

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REFERENCES

1. About 40–50 of the best known paintings and illustrations depicting Irish furniture & interiors have already been published in C. Kinmonth *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (Yale University Press, 1993),

Some of the artists published here were not mentioned in that book and may not indeed previously have been published, namely; Simon Coleman, Alfred Downing Fripp, Caroline Elizabeth Hamilton, William Bourke Kirvan, Henry O'Neill, Anthony Carey Stannus, Francis William Topham and Cornelius Varley. However, the work of James Brennan, Howard Helmick, Erskine Nicol and Jack B. Yeats is well represented in the book and should be viewed accordingly in context. For the sake of brevity underlying arguments supporting claims are omitted here, except where new evidence has come to light.

2. David Fitzpatrick in R. F. Foster ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 254–6.
3. J. C. Walton, 'The Household Effects of a Waterford Merchant Family in 1640', *Journal of The Cork Historical & Archaeological Society*, LXXXIII, No. 238 (July–Dec., 1978), 102.
4. Most of these inventories are from the c.18th & where relevant are listed in the footnotes of C. Kinmonth, *ibid.*, pp. 208–241.
5. Toby Barnard, 'Art, Architecture, Artifacts & Ascendancy' in *Bullan*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1994) and T. Barnard 'Domestic Servants in c18th Ireland' (Seminar Paper), Hertford College, Oxford, 21 Feb. 1995.
6. Colin Hayfield, 'Farm Servants' Accommodation on the Yorkshire Wolds' in *Folk Life*, vol. 33, (1994–95), 7–28.
7. W. Carleton, 'The Courtship of Phelim O'Toole' in *Six Irish Tales* (Dublin, 1833), 26. William Carleton (1794–1869) was a prolific popular novelist and accurate, unpatronising commentator on rural Irish life. Born in county Tyrone, his dramatic accounts frequently include detailed incidental descriptions of farmhouse furnishings.
8. This work is similar to another Claddagh, Galway painting also of 1844, attributed to the usually sentimental F. W. Topham, who was known to have painted with Fripp's brother George (1813–96) as well as with F. Goodall. See A. Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *The Watercolours of Ireland, works on paper in pencil, pastel & paint c. 1600–1914* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1994), 178, fig. 242, 302, 312.
9. J. Johnson & A. Greutzner, *The Dictionary of British Artists 1880–1940* (Antique Collector's Club, 1976), 188.
10. A. Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *ibid.*, 177–8.
11. A. Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *ibid.*, 178, fig. 242, 302, 312. The author is grateful to Martyn Anglesea (Keeper of Fine Art, Ulster Museum) for providing additional valuable information on Topham and on A. C. Stannus from his unpublished database.
12. A. Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *ibid.*, 275, fig. 383, 311. The author is grateful to Martyn Anglesea for providing additional valuable information from his unpublished database.
13. Anon, 'The Condition of the People of Ireland', No. III, *The Pictorial Times*, Vol. II, No. 152 (London, 7 Feb 1846), 92.
14. See C. Kinmonth, *ibid.*, 159, fig. 251.
15. E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, 1979), 93.
16. G. Hepplewhite, *The Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer's Guide* (London, 3rd edn., 1794), plate 103.
17. Sale catalogue of 'Important Irish Art' Adam Sale Rooms, St. Stephen's Green (Dublin, 17 May 1990).
18. William Carleton, S. Lover & Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Characteristic Sketches of Ireland and the Irish* (Dublin, 1845), 124.
19. This is discussed with reference to paintings by Mairead Dunlevy in 'Dublin in the Early Nineteenth Century: Domestic Evidence' Ch. 12 from B. Kennedy & R. Gillespie, *Ireland, Art into History* (Town House, 1994), 193.
20. Mr. Russell, 'The Condition of the People of Ireland', *The Pictorial Times* (London, 24 Jan., 1846), 56.
21. The diaries are housed in the collection of the Irish Folklore Commission, renamed the Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin.
22. G. Hill, *Facts from Gweedore* (1845, reprint of 5th edn., of 1887; Belfast, 1971), 16–17.
23. B. Kennedy & R. Gillespie, *Ireland, Art into History* (Town House, 1994), 172. A Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *ibid.*, 132–3, figs. 167–8, 304. R. F. Foster, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Ireland* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 194.
24. Only a few inventories of relevance appear to have been published or have come to light since the publication of my book, a notable example of an inventory of an Armagh town house, analysed in the context of the family's history is; L. A. Clarkson & E. M. Crawford, *Ways to Wealth, The Cust family of c18th Armagh* (The Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies, 1985), 67–82. A relatively small percentage of inventories for 'big houses' can help vernacular furniture research, primarily where they list items of the same name/type as that found in farmhouses, i.e. settle beds, press beds, súgán/straw chairs, dressers, etc.
25. For more on Helmick see K. McConkey, *A Free Spirit Irish Art 1860–1960* (Antique Collector's Club, 1990), 19.
26. For comparative example see his engraving in C. Kinmonth, *ibid.*, fig. 194. As more work is done by Irish art historians it becomes easier to identify the locations of paintings.

27. Charles H. Cook (1830–1906) exhibited his *The Irish Matchmaker* in 1864 at the R.H.A. and it now forms part of the collection of the National Library of Ireland. See fig. 53 of C. Kinmonth, *ibid.*, also fig. 54 E. Fitzpatrick's *Drowning the Shamrock on St. Patrick's Night* (1853) for similar symbolic & allegorical detail. The author is grateful to Peter Walsh for providing information about Noonan's paintings, as its accession notes were damaged by flooding.
28. A 'Peeler'; A Policeman, after Sir Robert Peel who established a police force in Ireland . . . Irish and British slang. Webster's *New 20th Unabridged Dictionary* (New York, 1983, 2nd ed.), 1322.
29. Unfortunately it is hard to glean more detailed information from examining the painting itself, under proper light, because it was stolen from an exhibition held at Marshall Fields, Chicago in September 1980 and is still lost.
30. A. Day & P. Williams, O.S. *Memoirs of Ireland* (May, June, 1840), Vol. 20, Box 52, XXI, 2, p. 77.
31. A. Day & P. Williams, O.S. *Memoirs of Ireland* (pre Dec. 1835), Vol. 13, Box 15, IV, 1 pp. 1–22.
32. Quoted by J. O'Brien & D. Guinness, *Great Irish Houses and Castles* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1992), 13.
33. *Folk Tradition in Irish Art; Catalogue of An Exhibition of Paintings from the Collection of the Dept. of Irish Folklore*, University College Dublin (12–27 Nov., 1993, Newman House, St. Stephen's Green, Dublin), 26, 48.
34. Compare to his *Irish Stew*, signed & dated 1851 (sold through Christie's New York in 1985, print unavailable), and *Praties & Boatemilk* of 1854. Also depicting the same arrangement is his *Praties and Point* from Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Tales of Irish Life & Character* (Foulis, 1909), 184. Nicol is one of few artists to have painted items like the settle bed and the draped tester or roofed beds.
35. H. L. Mallalieu, *The Dictionary of British Watercolour Artists up to 1920* (Antique Collector's Club, 1976), 190.
36. This and several other Nicol paintings are reproduced in C. Kinmonth, *ibid.*, figs; 87, 105, 232, 250, 259, 262 & 286.
37. C. Kinmonth 'The Last Straw?' in *Carloviana, the Journal of the Old Carlow Society*, No. 39, 1991/2, pp. 2–3, 9. and C. Kinmonth 'Chairs made of straw' in *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (Yale University Press, 1993), 63–8, and C. Kinmonth 'Drawing the Long Straw' in *Country Life* (21 Oct., 1993), 88–9.
38. Thomas Chippendale [Snr], *The Gentleman & Cabinetmaker's Director* (editions; 1754, 1755, 1762 & subsequent reprints).
39. *His Iron Will* (1880) and *Committee of Inspection* are reproduced in C. Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (Yale University Press, 1993), figs. 171, 181.
40. A. Crookshank & The Knight of Glin, *The Painters of Ireland c.1600–1920* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1978), 285 & fig. 283; this watercolour of c.1900, *The Patriot*, is another interior worth examining in terms of its portrayal of furniture.
41. Hilary Pyle, *The Different Worlds of Jack B. Yeats, His Cartoons & Illustrations* (Irish Academic Press, 1994), 43.
42. A. Crookshank & The Knight of Glin, *The Watercolours of Ireland, works on paper in pencil, pastel & paint c.1600–1914* (Barrie & Jenkins, 1994), 85–6, 312.
43. A. Crookshank & the Knight of Glin, *op. cit.*, p. 302.
44. As far as the author is aware, little recent research has apparently been carried out on distribution patterns of the two main types of wheel used in Ireland. See J. Horner, *The Linen Trade of Europe, during the spinning wheel period* (The Linenhall Press, Belfast, 1920). G. B. Thompson, *Spinning Wheels* (Ulster Museum Publication, 1976), 18–20, figs. 16, 22–3.
45. Particularly see various texts by Dr. Alan Gailey & Capt. K. Danaher/C. O. Danachair.