BOOK REVIEWS

BERNARD D. COTTON, *The English Regional Chair*, Antique Collectors' Club, Woodbridge (1990), £49.50.

The last eighty-seven years of English furniture history have seen a progressive extension, adjustment and refinement of the tradition which Percy Macquoid established with the publication of the first volume of his history in 1904. In so far as vernacular furniture is of any interest to this tradition it is in the way it fits into the chronological narrative by reflecting more fashionable styles after a time lapse depending on the remoteness of the craftsman. More idiosyncratic variations fit uncomfortably into the tradition and tend to be ignored as aberrations. With Bernard Cotton's *The English Regional Chair* we have the first major work on English furniture to step right outside the Macquoid tradition, offering a coherent geographically-based framework for the study of vernacular chairs as a subject in their own right. It is the sheer scale of his work which distinguishes it. Whilst others have unearthed the occasional stone, he has revealed the entire edifice.

How has he done it? Though he describes his analytical method as structuralist those readers with no experience of structuralism will find nothing in his approach which does not conform to the tenets of common sense. His methods were well described in his opening article in the first number of this journal in 1987 and do not need reiterating here, but central to his achievement is the identification of hundreds of chairmakers who stamped or labelled their work creating, when added to those already known, a pool of examples sufficiently large for regional characteristics to be identified and sub-groups analysed. Trade directories and census returns locate the makers chronologically and geographically (and anyone who has spent time working through census returns will appreciate what a laborious procedure this must have been).

After an excellent introductory chapter mainly outlining the methods of construction of rush-seated and Windsor chairs, Cotton goes on to identify six regions, each of which is allotted a chapter. The first, on the Thames Valley and the Chilterns, starts with a survey of the eighteenth-century background of the Windsor chair. This is the only section of the book which has been extensively covered by other writers, and the author is dependent on secondary sources for much of his material. He makes the occasional error of judgement; for example, I would question his assumption that hoop-back Windsors necessarily had crinoline stretchers or that there was an evolution from the cabriole to the turned leg, which in fact were made concurrently. As soon as he moves into the nineteenth century he is on securer ground and he produces a crop of name-stamped Windsors, many of them previously unrecorded. A splendid discussion of the Prior family of Uxbridge follows. This brings together evidence from name-stamped chairs, trade directories, census returns, parish records, surviving bills and even an 1810 drawing of Uxbridge High Street showing the Prior workshop and showroom complete with signboard. It all comes together to form a very satisfactory history of the Prior enterprise with a lucid discussion of the varieties of chair made, some of which may have been peculiar to the firm, enabling unstamped examples to be attributed. A discussion of the High Wycombe tradition follows and there is an excellent section recapping his previous work on Oxford chairmakers, incorporating some new material.

There are exemplary chapters on the West Midlands and the south-west, areas which were previously virgin territory apart from Gabriel Olive's work on Yealmpton chairs and F. C. Morgan's on the Clisset family.

In his chapter on the north-east (including the north-east Midlands) Cotton has made sense of a very diverse field and it is intriguing to see a pattern emerging for the Windsor with a progressively northern drift of design influences. The earliest Lincolnshire makers incorporated many Thames Valley features. Leg turnings typical of Lincolnshire then appeared in chairs made in Newark, Nottinghamshire. Splat designs developed in Nottinghamshire turned up on later Yorkshire chairs, and Newcastle makers subsequently incorporated features of both Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire Windsors into their designs. This illustrates the importance of taking a holistic approach to regional design and not categorising chairs on isolated stylistic features.

The longest chapter is that on the north-west. Here there is a very complicated pattern of interrelationships between the various forms of spindle back and ladder back chairs. Some form of diagrammatic presentation of stylistic features would have been helpful as a continuous narrative is not the best way of presenting the complexities in this field.

Faced with such complexities one possible way forward is to list all the quantifiable features of chairs and use this material to organise them into degrees of similarity, a process known as cluster analysis. This lends itself to computerisation and Cotton has undertaken an interesting experiment along these lines using a group of forty-five Mendlesham chairs as his material. Unfortunately he has presented the results of the analysis in a very abbreviated form as a 'cluster analysis dendrogram' without relating the findings back to the chairs themselves, so we are left not much the wiser.

The Mendlesham analysis occurs of course in the chapter on East Anglian chairs, which is the least satisfactory section of the book. Cotton's rejection of what I have called the Macquoid tradition of furniture history has given him an original and generally stimulating approach to vernacular furniture, but in the East Anglian chapter he addresses the question of the influence of 'mainstream' furniture (as typified by the published designs of Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton) on East Anglian regional design. The implication is that the metropolitan influence was stronger in East Anglia than elsewhere, but there seems to be no real evidence to support this view. His indifference to mainstream furniture leads him into some errors of judgement. For example he considers an S-shaped arm-support terminating in a block on the side of the seat to be a 'signature' of East Anglian chairs in the Chippendale tradition. But this arm-support is itself a feature of Chippendale's *Director* designs, and indeed of armchairs in general in the rococo tradition. To use the arm-support is to adhere to that tradition and cannot be regarded as a regional practice. To use turned arm-supports continuous with the front leg, on the other hand (as on north-western chairs), is to deviate from the tradition and can be considered a regional convention.

This confusion of regional and mainstream features leads to the curious conclusion that a cane-seated japanned beechwood chair in the V. & A. is from East Anglia. The chair in question is a sophisticated example of a standard Regency style and in no way can be regarded as a vernacular chair. The features which Cotton adduces as being East Anglian in origin (swept-back legs, fine ring turnings, etc.) are part of the common vocabulary of

high-fashion chairs of the period and only appear secondarily as a feature of East Anglian chairs.

One question which Cotton only touches on is the relationship between place of manufacture and place of use of chairs. We know that Thames Valley Windsors were being sold as far afield as Tyneside in the 1780s and Cotton shows examples of High Wycombe chairs in use in Norfolk and even being shown on a Norwich cabinet-maker's trade label. Distribution by sea, canal and later by rail enabled Thames Valley makers to establish a nationwide market. Chairs of other regions, for example the north-west and south-west, seem not to have been marketed far outside the area of manufacture. The Nottinghamshire firm of Allsop sold extensively in Yorkshire. The subject is fundamental to the whole concept of vernacular furniture and is relevant when it comes to doing fieldwork on the provenance of chairs because the fact that a chair is found in a particular area does not necessarily indicate that it was made there. On the other hand if it is not found outside the area then this must be strong supportive evidence for local manufacture. The problem with many of Cotton's illustrations is that he often designates a chair as being 'attributed to' an area but fails to tell us whether the attribution is based on stylistic grounds alone or whether he knows its history. His book will be used by future furniture historians as a source of material so it is a pity that his basis for attributions is so frequently absent. In his chapter on the north-west region the author includes a photograph of an old lady sitting in a rocking chair (Fig. NW397) which bears a striking resemblance to a stamped chair made by R. H. & J. Simpson of Lancaster. What he does not mention is that the photograph was taken in Appersett, Wensleydale, which would have told us something about the spread of Lancashire chairs over the Pennines into Yorkshire. Without this vital primary evidence we are unable to make this sort of deduction.

One of the difficulties Cotton has encountered is that of dating many of the chairs he illustrates. Often a chair will be dated '*c.* 1800–1880', which is an honest indication of the present state of knowledge but must surely indicate that the next stage in research is going to have to be closer attention to the way chair design changed with time, so as to allow more accurate dating. This can only be done by reference to name-stamped chairs and devising a chronology. In a book conceived on this scale it would be surprising if occasional errors of dating did not occur. One such concerns a spindle-back in the Lancashire/Cheshire tradition stamped W. WORSLEY (Figs NW106/7) which Cotton attributes to a William Worlsey of Manchester working in 1772. But the stamp uses a sans-serif die and as sans-serif type was invented in 1816 and only became widely used in the mid-nineteenth century this must be a mis-attribution. On the subject of dates it is surprising to see the author quoting Thomas Chippendale's dates (p. 364) as 1749–1822, which are actually the dates of his son.

There are occasional verbal idiosyncracies; for example the author often refers to the 'demeanour' of chairs and he uses the term elliptical throughout to mean fusiform or spindle-shaped.

The book is handsomely produced and essential to its success are the 1,400 black-and-white and 70 coloured illustrations. These are beautifully executed and even without the text would provide a major pool of material for future research. Very full legends are given under each illustration, often including cross-references to other figures. Most of the colour illustrations are not referred to in the text, and one has the impression that they were added

after the text was completed. The value of the book would have been greatly increased if a graphic designer had been employed to produce line drawings of many of the design features discussed, as these can often convey so much more than a photograph. Incorporation of such drawings into diagrams to show design interrelationships and influences could have made the book much easier to use and would have emphasised the visual nature of what is a highly visual subject.

The census and trade directory material have been assembled by the author's not-to-be-forgotten assistants into a register of makers which covers sixty-four closely-printed pages. This is a mine of information but it seems perverse to have presented it county by county instead of as a single alphabetical directory. As a consequence, if one wants to look up a maker and has no idea where he worked, one has to hunt through twenty-one separate lists. Even more surprising in a work of such importance is the absence of an index, making the tracking down of individual chairmakers in the text a laborious business. When the second edition is published, which it surely must be, the register should be collated into a single alphabetical list with page references added so that it doubles as an index nominum. If the services of a professional indexer are prohibitively expensive then a willing band of R.F.S. members could surely be found to undertake this task and thereby contribute to the success of one of the handful of the most important books ever written on English furniture.

JOHN STABLER

ELIZABETH WHITE, *Pictorial Dictionary of British 18th Century Furniture Designs*, Antique Collectors' Club Ltd, Woodbrige (1990), 503 pp., £65.00.

Many furniture historians have dreamed of a volume such as this which sets out to reproduce all recorded English eighteenth-century printed furniture designs (apart from those featured on trade cards). Two of Daniel Marot's *Œuvres* published in the Hague and Amsterdam are happily also included because of their influence on fashionable taste. The crop of late Victorian reprints of furniture pattern books was intended mainly to give modern furniture manufacturers easy access to the classic designs of Chippendale, Hepplewhite and Sheraton. After the *Dictionary of English Furniture* (1954) brought furniture studies more into the mainstream of art history, the V. & A. published Peter Ward-Jackson's scholarly *English Furniture Designs of the Eighteenth Century* (1958), a monograph which inspired Tiranti in the early 1960s to reprint important but scarce pattern books by Stalker and Parker, Thomas Johnson, Ince and Mayhew, Shearer and various Regency designers. Then, in 1975, the F.H.S. produced complete editions of several previously overlooked minor collections and four years later, Morrison Heckscher, also in *Furniture History*, brought together all the engraved designs of Lock and Copland. Thus, by 1980, the only significant suite not available in a modern reprint was Robert Manwaring's *The Chair-Maker's Guide* (1766). Although much material is now available outside rare book libraries, a compendium such as this is still going to be of inestimable value.

Elizabeth White and the Antique Collectors' Club must be congratulated on a splendid achievement. The author has been especially diligent in rounding up designs for furniture

scattered throughout books of architecture and various trade manuals; her census has also been rewarded by the discovery of a previously unrecorded pattern book, B. Pastorini's *A New Book of Designs for Girandoles and Glass Frames* (1775). The 3,500 illustrations are presented chronologically according to furniture type, an arrangement which makes it easy to hunt for design sources. The plates are clearly reproduced to a generous size, while the captions are lucid, making the book extremely pleasant to handle and browse through. A liberal interpretation of the term 'furniture' allows space for fire grates, chimneypieces and overmantels, overdoors, Chinese fencing, garden pavilions with seats, even pulpits, pedestals for sundials and a welcome coverage of interior elevations and room plans. Accordingly, designs by E. Hoppus, A. Swan, P. Baretti, J. Crunden, N. Wallace, P. Begbie and many other little-known figures are featured. Soloman Hudson is proposed as the likely author of *Twelve New Designs of Frames for Looking Glasses, Pictures &c*, issued by S. H. in 1779. A section titled 'Miscellaneous Ornaments for Carvers etc' contains an anthology of three dozen engravings, but sadly not Thomas Chippendale Jr.'s elegant *Sketches of Ornament* (1779) on six leaves. Obviously a line had to be drawn somewhere, but hopefully enough has been said to show that this eagerly awaited book offers a cornucopia of riches.

The plates are prefaced by a straightforward introduction describing why furniture pattern books were published, what purpose they served, how the demand for them developed and explaining their value as a guide to polite taste. This account is followed by basic notes on the designers; there is an enterprising appendix on the notorious re-strikes issued by John Weale *c.* 1833–58, a sketchy list of modern reprints, a bibliography, and index. The carefully footnoted text shows that Elizabeth White is well versed in the literature of her subject and she relies, for the most part, on summarising existing knowledge. No detailed bibliographical analysis is attempted and, apart from the trawl of sources, there is only modest evidence of the kind of original academic research which would establish new bearings and place the study of furniture pattern books on a fresh footing.

The *Pictorial Dictionary* will certainly be intensively used, so how does it rank as a work of scholarship? In terms of comprehensiveness, the piano which Sheraton designed in 1796 for Don Manuel de Godoy has been left out, so have a travelling bidet and a worktable in *The Cabinet-Makers' London Book of Prices* (1793), pl. 25, figs 2 and 3, also two variant plates (27, 43) in the third edition of Chippendale's *Director*, together with two featuring frets and two depicting railings from the first edition. Two illustrations from the *Director*, a desk and bookcase, p. 224 (lower left), and a bed, p. 154 (middle) reproduce plates from the first edition, but are mis-captioned as coming from the third, in which both designs were radically modified (in each instance the revised plate is omitted from the survey). Staying with Chippendale for the moment, it is irritating that the date of the third edition is consistently given as 1763, whereas 1762 is printed on the title page; there were 161 (not 160) plates in the first edition; Chippendale's partner, James Rannie, died in 1766 (not 1776) and Adam did not design the furniture Chippendale supplied to Garrick's villa, and the firm is not known to have made any furniture to Adam's design during the years 1770–85. Elsewhere, there is a confusion between William and John Gordon, and the mysterious Samuel Gordon (p. 27) should probably read 'Samuel Norman'. The titles of several pattern books are mis-spelt, Peter Glazier's contribution to Lock's *New Book of Ornaments* is overlooked, and no reference is made to Thomas Langley's designs in his elder

brother's publications. Since fire-grates in furniture pattern books are illustrated, a reference to W. Glossop's *The Stove-Grate Makers Assistant* and W. and J. Welldon's *The Smith's Right Hand*, both of which contain collections of designs for grates, would have even if there was insufficient space to illustrate them. In a work of this complexity, errors and omissions are almost inevitable. On the whole, the book achieves what it sets out to perform, although as a reference work it is defective in points of detail.

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