

A HISTORY OF COLLECTING VERNACULAR FURNITURE IN SCOTLAND

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The name, *Am Fasgadh*, meaning the Shelter, came to me in another flash, when I found myself explaining that the function of the museum was to shelter homely, Highland things that were in danger of destruction.¹

Isabel Grant (1887–1983) first conceived of *Am Fasgadh*, the Highland Folk Museum, late in 1934, motivated by a conviction to record the Highland way of life through its material culture, before both disappeared. As interest in Scotland's vernacular furniture had, up to this date, been desultory, Grant's work was shaped by a sense of urgency that made her metaphor of the shelter particularly appropriate. The early history of collecting vernacular furniture in Scotland is dominated by the efforts, not of institutions, but of individuals, many of them women, aware of the potential loss of this aspect of Scotland's folk life, through neglect and indifference.

Am Fasgadh, Britain's first folk museum, was founded relatively late in the history of the European folk museum. In Scandinavia, a precedent for fully documented ethnological collections had been established during the previous century, in such museums as the Nordiska Museum founded in 1873, and its outdoor department at Skansen, Stockholm, opened in 1891, Frilandsmuseet, founded near Copenhagen in 1901, and the Sandvig Collection at Lillehammer, opened in 1904.² One reason, proposed by Grant, for Britain's late entry into this field, was that the comparatively early industrialisation of Britain had stifled proper appreciation of rural life.³ Countries that became industrialised later, such as Sweden, had the opportunity to appraise the effects of this process already in existence elsewhere.

While it is true that Sweden did not experience accelerated industrial growth until the second half of the nineteenth century, as opposed to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Scotland, by the end of the nineteenth century the agricultural sector was still very important to Scotland, and has remained so.⁴ However, Scotland, by the turn of the century, seemed more keen to celebrate its industrial than its rural heritage. This was well demonstrated at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901. Here, technological advance was the protagonist, rural traditions receiving little attention. Celtic heritage was given a minor role in the shape of the Irish pavilion, described in the Official Guide as 'quaint and pretty in appearance ... admirably adapted for the requirements of a small tourist hotel'.⁵ By contrast, the Scandinavian countries seemed anxious to highlight their rural traditions. At the Paris World Fair of 1878, an exhibition of old farmhouse interiors was included in the Swedish section. The next year in Copenhagen, farmhouse interiors with panelling and furniture were displayed at an exhibition of Art and Industry.⁶

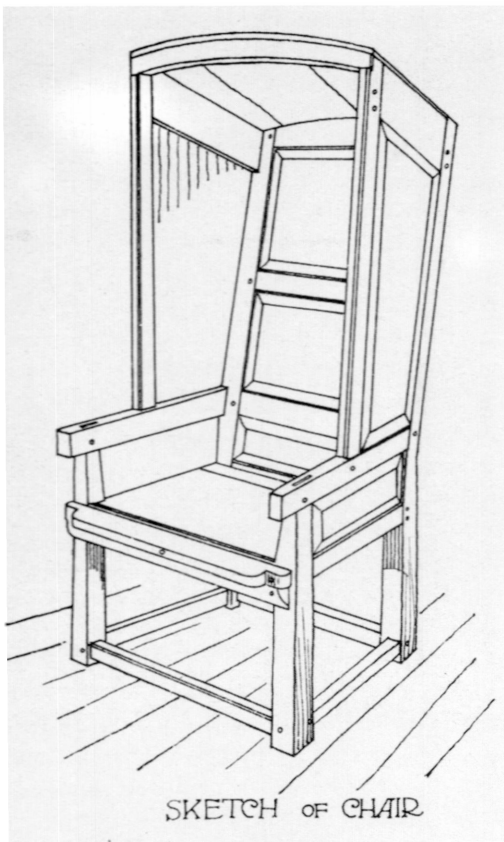
It has been pointed out that socio-economic conditions in late nineteenth-century Sweden were propitious to the appreciation of native folk culture. Contemporaneous with rapid industrial growth was the development of a nationalistic romanticism.⁷ However, in

Scotland too, romanticism appreciably shaped concepts about native folk life. The enquiry into Gaelic literature reached back to the eighteenth century, fuelled largely by the Ossian controversy. During the nineteenth century, many of the Highland Societies which formed throughout Britain concerned themselves with the preservation of the costume, music and literature of the Highlands.⁸

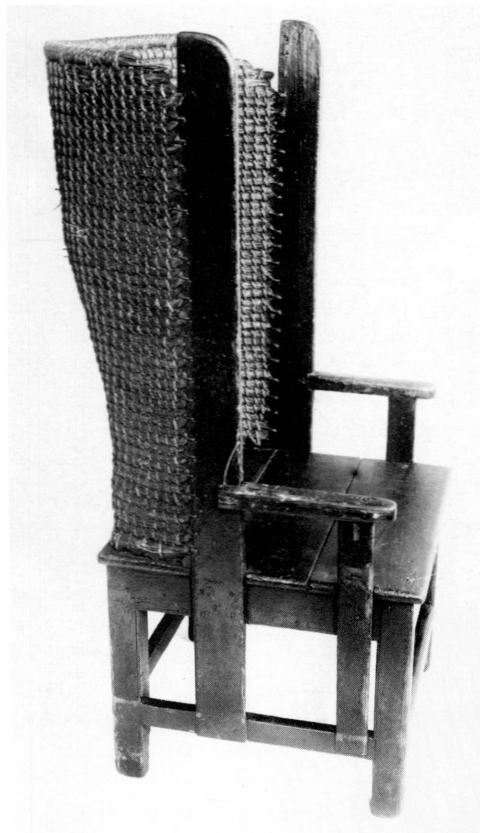
The increasing awareness of the need to safeguard Scotland's folk heritage, though, did not extend to the country's vernacular furniture. The reasons for this probably did not lie so much in the socio-economic conditions discussed above, but in the nature of much of this furniture. The vernacular furniture of other northern European countries was in many instances easily distinguishable from high-style furniture. The majority of Scotland's vernacular furniture, though, adhered to the cabinet-making rather than craft tradition, emulating fashionable styles, often of the eighteenth century. The perceived lack of a clear distinction between Scottish vernacular and high style perhaps made it easier to disdain the former as a debased version of its source. It seems likely this furniture was judged lacking in the engagingly primitive qualities associated with folk material culture. Perhaps ironically, there developed in Britain a growing appreciation for the folk culture of other countries; in the early twentieth century, *Studio* magazine produced a series of illustrated books on the peasant art of, for example, Sweden, Lapland, Iceland, Russia and Italy.⁹ In 1902, an Exhibition of Peasant Art had been mounted at the Charterhouse Museum, highlighting the 'entirely wholesome and often admirable art instinct amongst the peasantries of Europe'.¹⁰

In North America, too, there was growing appreciation not only for the folk art of European countries, but that of America. The history of collecting folk material culture in America, and the impetus behind this collecting, have been examined in some depth.¹¹ It does seem relevant to point out here that much of the vernacular furniture collected and discussed was of the type distinguishable from high-style furniture. The painted furniture of Pennsylvania, reviewed in an early issue of *Antiques*, is a case in point. Further, in *Antiques*, which started in 1922, American collectors of folk art and vernacular furniture had a forum in which to exchange the results of their research, as the founding editor, Homer Milton Keyes, encouraged scholarship in this area. Scotland had no parallel publication, while *Connoisseur*, founded in 1901, focused primarily on élite antiques, or, from time to time, English 'cottage furniture'. Against a background of increasing knowledge of the folk art of other nations, Scotland's vernacular furniture lacked the valued distinction of 'separateness'.

English furniture in the craft tradition proved more pliable; Charles Eastlake's commendation of the Windsor chair anticipated several decades of romantic commentaries on English vernacular.¹² The Arts and Crafts Movement seems to have been largely responsible for the revaluation of English regional furniture; the premise that vernacular architecture could provide a viable model for domestic architects was logically accompanied by a reconsideration of vernacular furnishings as models for designers. The 'Sussex chair' marketed by Morris and Company is probably the best known application of this philosophy, although parallels are to be found in Edwin Lutyens' rush-seated ladderback chairs, and Ernest Gimson's work with Hereford chairmaker Philip Clissett. It is pertinent to add that several Scottish architects emulated distinctive English types; James MacLaren modelled his Ledbury chair on a traditional Worcestershire pattern, and an oak ladderback with a rush seat is Charles Rennie Mackintosh's earliest known chair design.¹³



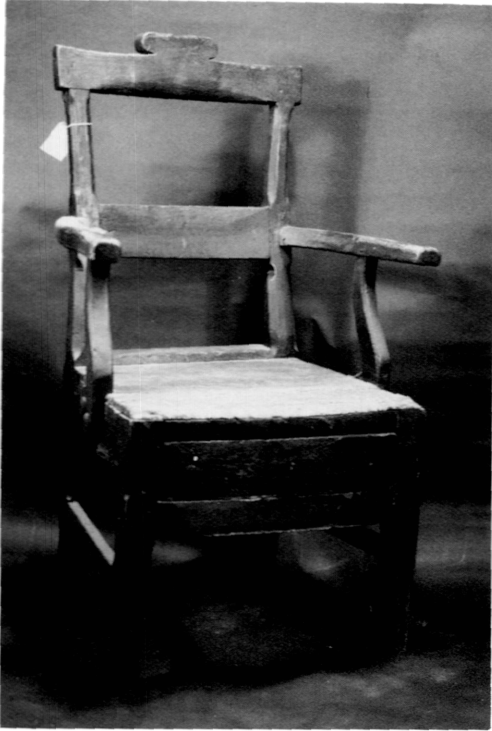
1. Drawing of Orkney chair, belonging to C. S. S. Johnston. James Gillespie, *Details of Scottish Domestic Architecture* (Edinburgh, 1922), plate 94



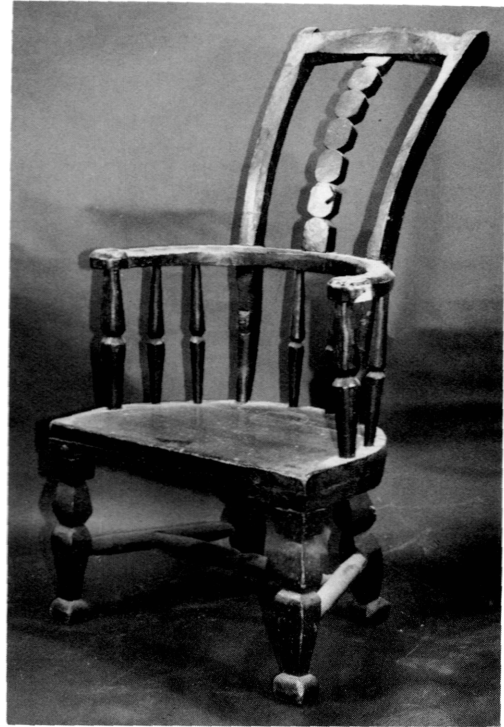
2. Orkney straw-backed chair, donated to the Museum of Antiquities of Scotland by Miss A. C. Barr, 1934
National Museums of Scotland

By the early 1900s, an interest in collecting authentic specimens of English vernacular furniture was widening. Although the inclusion of this furniture in domestic interiors had been the predilection of the progressive, the taste began to disseminate to the middle classes, fostered by a burgeoning literature on the subject. The *Connoisseur*, dispensed advice on how to assess and procure 'farmhouse and cottage furniture'.¹⁴ Arthur Hayden produced a book on the subject in 1912.¹⁵ Common to these publications is a nostalgic romanticism about a rural lifestyle fast disappearing. The perceived threat came as much from avaricious dealers catering for the American market, as from the cottars themselves, who were discovered converting heirlooms into dog kennels.¹⁶

The vernacular furniture of Scotland is conspicuously absent from most of this literature. If mentioned, it is usually relegated to the 'Celtic Fringe': 'Scotland has antiquities of her own which are closely allied to those of all the Gaelic races. As with Welsh carved farmhouse furniture, there is a marked leaning towards coarse style. As a rule, it is too



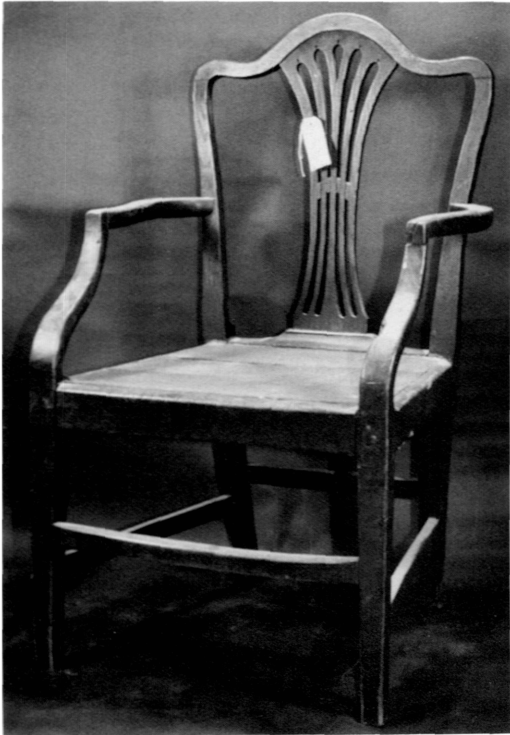
3. Armchair with drawer under seat and shaped back rail, Kingussie and Inverness-shire. Purchased at a roup pre-1954
Highland Folk Museum



4. Stick-back chair with extension.
Purchased from Nairn pre-1954
Highland Folk Museum

utilitarian in appearance to display much carving.¹⁷ The Scotsman, John Warrack, conspired with this view in his book on early Scottish furniture, attributing a lack of domestic comfort to the country's proverbial poverty.¹⁸ However, there are indications that certain, select types of Scottish vernacular furniture were beginning to appeal to collectors. Appropriately, furniture in the craft tradition was reproduced; as David Jones has pointed out, the Caithness firm of McIvor and Allan began reproducing Caithness chairs in the early twentieth century, before the tradition had died out.¹⁹

Scottish architects and antiquarians demonstrated some interest in native vernacular furniture. A hooded Orkney chair, in the possession of the Edinburgh architect C. S. S. Johnston, was illustrated in a book published in 1922 by the Edinburgh Architectural Association (Fig. 1). Robert Lorimer, whose architectural interests were rooted in Scotland's vernacular architecture, also collected his country's vernacular furniture, such as a 'Scotch chest',²⁰ a 'gossiping chair', and a quantity of furniture described as old Scotch oak or elm.²¹ Lorimer also collected English vernacular furniture, such as Windsor chairs, and French and Dutch vernacular furniture, combining these pieces with high-style pieces in his interiors.²² His friend, Frank Deas's dining room at the Murrel, Fife, was photographed with a Windsor armchair *in situ*.²³



5. Hepplewhite-type chair, Trossachs and Perthshire. Purchased from Miss Berry of Edinburgh, 28 May 1936
Highland Folk Museum



6. Yoke-back chair, from Michie, Cairncross
Glenesk Folk Museum

It was officially proposed in 1929 that the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland should initiate the development of a Scottish open air museum, yet the museum at this date had no defined policy on collecting Scottish vernacular furniture.²⁵ Examples, such as an Orkney straw-backed chair, donated by Miss A. C. Barr, entered the collection on a piecemeal basis (Fig. 2). As Alexander Fenton has pointed out, when Arthur Hazelius was collecting for Skansen, the interests of Scottish antiquaries generally lay in Roman archaeological remains.²⁶ As was the case with Skansen, the Highland Folk Museum was largely created through the endeavours of one person. Before embarking on the project, Grant had studied the social and economic history of Scotland, yet by her own admission had found this a 'lonely and unrewarding furrow to plough'.²⁷ In retrospect, despite the support of a great many interested people, the founding of the museum had at times been exasperating, disappointing, and equally lonely.

Like Hazelius, Grant travelled through rural districts, attending sales and establishing contacts, helped by the reputation of her published work. She compared her approach to the process of academic research, systematically covering the Highlands on field trips to secure the exhibits that were her historical data.²⁸ By the outbreak of the Second World War, the



7. Pine dresser
National Trust for Scotland

folk museum had nearly two thousand objects, of which about a fifth had been donated, and the remainder purchased or exchanged.²⁹ In compliance with her research orientation, the items were well catalogued and provenances recorded, laying the groundwork for her discussion of furniture in *Highland Folk Ways*, which contains her observations on the function of items, regional types, and regional variations in construction and material.

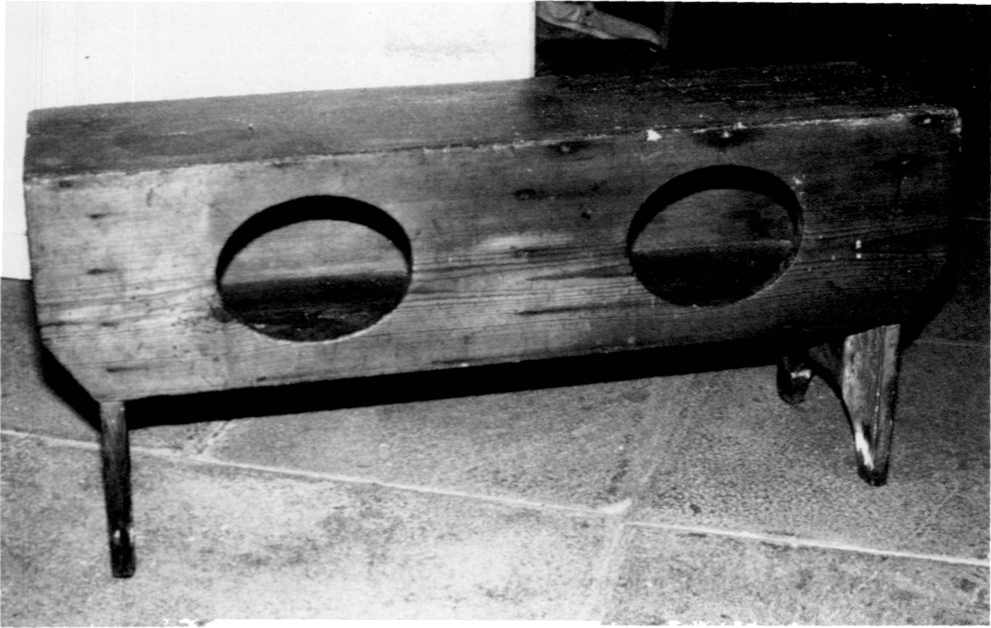
Although some pieces, such as the Inverness-shire chair with an underseat drawer (Fig. 3), were acquired at rousps³⁰ and others directly from the owners, several were bought from antique dealers. For example, a Ross-shire chair was purchased from 'Ye Olde Shoppe' in Glasgow in May 1938, for £1 8s., and a Restoration chair from Messrs A. Fraser & Co. of Inverness, one of the small number of Scottish dealers to advertise relatively early in *Connoisseur*.³¹ As well as antique furniture and paintings, this company supplied 'Highland curios'.³² Margaret Michie also purchased from antique dealers on occasion, suggesting the existence of a market, however limited, for Scottish vernacular and regional furniture.³³



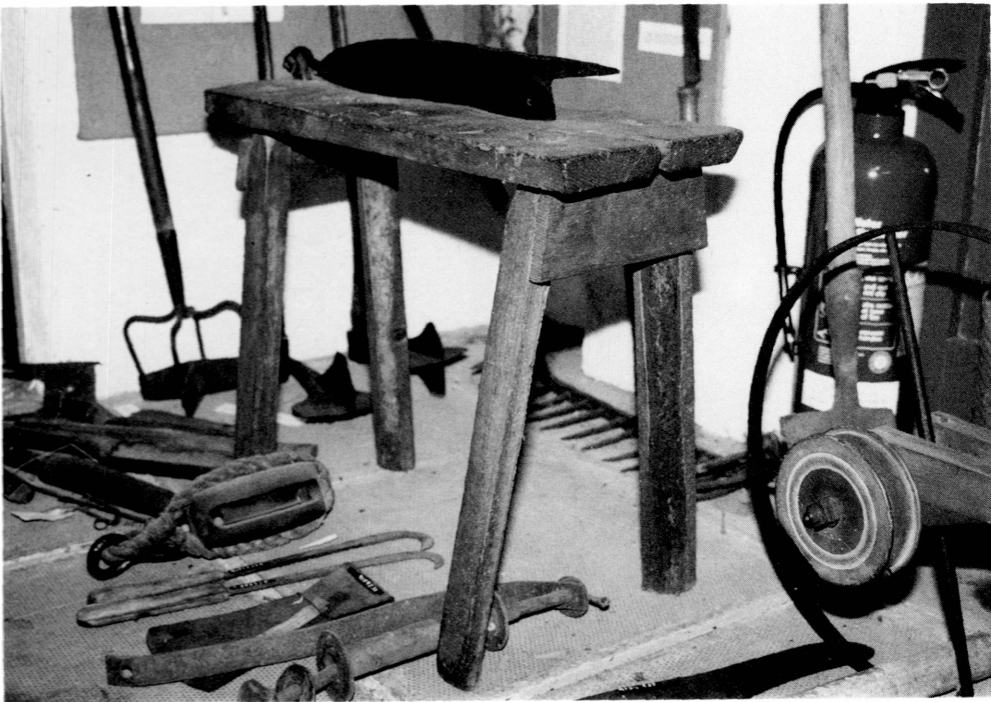
8. Reconstructed kitchen from Craichie
National Trust for Scotland



9. Reconstructed kitchen from Craichie
National Trust for Scotland
Photograph: Dundee Courier and Advertiser



10. Dairy stool
Glenesk Folk Museum



11. Turnip-slicing stool
National Trust for Scotland



12. Child's chair, from Eggos of Shinfur
Glenesk Folk Museum



13. Hanging shelves, with drawers
Glenesk Folk Museum

Grant's collection encompassed both furniture in the craft tradition, such as Caithness chairs, stick-back chairs and wickerwork items, and furniture in the cabinet-making tradition. Her concern to present a survey covering all aspects of life throughout the Highlands and Islands, led to an egalitarian inclusion of distinctive regional types, pieces imported from urban centres, the finely crafted and the roughly hewn. Figure 4, an extremely unusual variant on the Celtic stick-back type, with a backwards sweeping extension, was worked by adze. The uprights, arm supports and back sticks are nailed to the top seat board, the legs to the under seat board, and the two seat boards nailed together. The chair is painted black.³⁴

Grant interpreted Highland furniture as testifying to her argument that the old Highland civilisation was not divided by class, but was homogeneous and essentially aristocratic.³⁵ To illustrate this, she invoked the chairs made by local craftsmen from native woods, emulating fashionable eighteenth-century types imported from cosmopolitan centres by the gentry and the tacksmen (Fig. 5).³⁶ She observed that in many cases the patterns of this élite furniture had been adapted to Highland cottage conditions; for example, often chairs were low to compensate for the peat smoke.³⁷

In Grant's claims for the old Highland society, there is an element of romanticism. She herself was to admit that in a time of encroaching urbanisation, folk life held a 'spell-binding charm'.³⁸ It is obvious that Grant, like Gertrude Jekyll, valued vernacular furniture for its associational as well as documentary value. As David Lowenthal has astutely remarked, 'The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections'. Despite Grant's appreciation of the tremendous benefits the industrial Revolution had brought to Scotland, her predilections lay with the lost social and artistic traditions of the Highlands.³⁹

The same desire to safeguard the material culture of a society in flux motivated Lady Jean Maitland of Burnside, Forfar, (1890–1981) to assemble a collection relating to the folk life of the Angus region. A substantial amount of vernacular furniture was included as part of her programme to represent the traditions of the agricultural community. Jean Maitland readily acknowledged the influence of Isabel Grant on her work, and the two women became close friends.⁴⁰ She is quoted as explaining, 'I felt that what Dr. Grant did for the Highlands, we could do for the South'.⁴¹ However, the demands of a young family restricted her early collecting activities.

At first, she stored the incipient collection in her laundry, before securing temporary accommodation at Rescobie Manse, which opened to the public in 1953 as The Angus and District Folk Museum. Although her approach lacked the rigour of Grant's more academic methods, she learnt much about her exhibits from talking with the people who made and used them. The knowledge she thus acquired resulted in the development of a wide correspondence on folk artefacts, especially with North Americans. Like Grant, she secured objects through assiduous fieldwork, and the cultivation of contacts within rural communities. With her husband, Ramsay Maitland, she regularly attended farm rousps, acquiring agricultural machinery as well as the domestic furniture for which there was often little demand. The museum had an early equivalent of the now prevalent museum shop, as at auctions Lady Maitland would buy in lots, reselling unwanted items in the museum to raise funds.

Her close involvement with the rural community around Forfar resulted in individuals saving, and donating or selling exhibits to the museum on a large scale. The pine dresser,

illustrated in Figure 7, was given to the 12th Earl of Airlie by his former nurse, and subsequently entered Lady Maitland's collection. Other invaluable sources were the tinkers and scrap merchants with whom she became friendly; in exchange for items such as children's clothing, they contributed utensils and cooking implements. The collection includes one reconstructed room, with a double box bed, assembled at the museum on the demolition of the Taylor family's home at Craichie, in 1960 (Figs 8 and 9).⁴² Items have since been added to the reconstruction.

In 1957, the 16th Earl of Strathmore offered the museum the present premises at Kirkwynd, Glamis. In 1974, the Angus Folk Collection Trust asked the National Trust for Scotland to assume responsibility for the collection. In one sense, the Trust, started in 1931, had an early involvement with vernacular furnishings. J. M. Barrie's home in Kirriemuir, and Hugh Miller's cottage at Cromarty, were donated to the Trust in 1937 and 1938 respectively. Both contain vernacular furniture, yet it is likely this has been valued primarily for its associational properties. The Trust has since compiled an extensive and representative collection of Scottish vernacular furniture, on display at various locations mainly to illustrate the different standards of furnishing used by different social strata.⁴³ This collection should provide a productive source for future research.

Like Isabel Grant and Lady Maitland, Margaret Michie (1905–85), the youngest member of the triumvirate, was inspired to collect vernacular furniture as part of her wider effort to record and preserve part of the culture of a changing community.⁴⁴ She succinctly identified the impetus behind her collecting activities: 'I started work on a thesis on the depopulation of the Angus Glens which turned into a Museum.'⁴⁵ The achievement of her academic research and collecting was the establishment in 1955 of the Glenesk Folk Museum, near Tarfside, Angus. Again, close involvement with the rural community was fundamental to the success of the venture, as Michie testified: 'The Museum attempts to represent the past of this upland rural community in which it exists, mainly from the mid 18th century. Practically every Glen family has contributed to the display ... The museum could never have existed had it not been for the people who valued their inheritance and wished it to be recorded.'⁴⁶ Demographic changes in the glen had occurred partially as a result of the amalgamation of farms; the rousps which often accompanied these events afforded Michie the opportunity to secure domestic furniture and farm and kitchen equipment. The dairy stool in the Glenesk Folk Museum (Fig. 10), like the turnip slicing stool in the Angus Folk Museum (Fig. 11), are examples of the nebulous category of furniture, evolved for purely utilitarian ends, which all three women found of interest.

Michie acquired exhibits for the museum from her own family, who had been in the glen for a number of generations. An example is the yoke-back chair illustrated in Figure 6, which came from the family farm at Cairncross where Michie had been born.⁴⁷ To the tenancy of Cairncross, Margaret's brother Duncan added the farms of Glentennet and Shinfur, the provenance of the child's chair illustrated in Figure 12.⁴⁸ Many of the museum's exhibits came from the house of Miss Lindsay, a former needlework teacher at Tarfside School. Indeed, after Miss Lindsay's death, Michie related that the museum had acquired almost one thousand items from her home.⁴⁹

Michie's insistence that the exhibits should have a Glen Esk provenance means that it may be possible, in the future, to identify regional characteristics within the collection. For instance, a number of chairs are of ladderback type. In the Angus Folk Museum there are

chairs of this pattern, which might suggest the existence of a ladderback tradition in Angus.⁵⁰ In Michie's collection, there are a number of hanging shelves, some with drawers underneath (Fig. 13). With further research, it may be possible to link this type to the region.

As with Grant, the Scandinavian folk museums exercised a considerable influence on Michie's approach; particularly formative was the aesthetic behind some of the smaller Norwegian museums she visited, which were fully integrated into their communities.⁵¹ From the outset, the Glenesk Folk Museum resembled these ventures, contributing to the economic and social life of the rural community. The museum became a base for the teaching of traditional crafts, through the work of the Highland Home Industries movement, which operated a shop on the premises.⁵²

In the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, an invaluable work was done to preserve Scotland's vernacular furniture, due mainly to the perspicacity of individuals. The primary impetus behind collecting at this time was a regard for the documentary value of the furniture. This is in contrast to the earlier appreciation of vernacular furniture as a means of furnishing the middle- or upper-class interior. It need only be pointed out that the founders of the folk museums discussed here did not choose to live with their collections. Since the establishment of these three folk museums, the collection of Scottish vernacular furniture has expanded, with the burgeoning of the regional folk museum. A few examples with representative collections of regional furniture are Gladstone Court in Biggar, Auchindrain, a West Highland township developed as an open air museum, the Shetland Museum, the Orkney Farm and Folk Museum, the Isle of Arran Heritage Museum, and the Scottish Fisheries Museum at Anstruther. Much of the furniture in these museums was acquired from local individuals.

The Scottish Ethnological Archive, formerly the Scottish Country Life Section of the National Museums of Scotland, has compiled a collection of vernacular furniture, in conjunction with its ongoing research. However, the policy that exhibits should remain in their region of origin takes precedence where local folk museums are active. This collecting on an institutional level has been complemented by private collecting, for domestic interiors. In tandem, research on Scottish vernacular furniture has developed considerably, rendering this class far less in need of 'sheltering' than when Isabel Grant began her work.

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30. Highland Folk Museum, KNB61.
31. Highland Folk Museum, KNB5, KNB71.
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48. This chair was probably acquired from previous owners of the farm, as its provenance is recorded, 'Eggos of Shinfur'.
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