

Recent Publications

GOOD CITIZENS FURNITURE:

The Arts and Crafts Collections at Cheltenham

by Annette Carruthers and Mary Greensted.

Published by Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, April 1994

168 pages, 200 illustrations (12 in colour) Paper covers.

Retail price £19.50

ISBN 0 85331 650 3

Summary:- This book is the first to document the exceptional collection of Arts and Crafts furniture held at Cheltenham: from William Morris and his circle right up to present day craft furniture makers such as Alan Peters.

Each item of furniture in the collection is fully catalogued and illustrated alongside its catalogue entry. In addition, three chapters describe the general principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement with particular reference to furniture design, the growth of the Movement in the Cotswolds, and the development of the Cheltenham collection.

VICTORIAN FURNITURE, TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN

by Clive D Edwards, published by Manchester University Press 1993.

209 pages, 33 illustrations. Price £10.99

ISBN 0 7190 3783 2 paperback

CEREMONIAL AND COMMEMORATIVE CHAIRS IN GREAT BRITAIN

by Clare Graham

Published by the V & A, May 1994.

112 pages 150 B & W illustrations. Price £37.95

ISBN 1 85177 136 0

CLAUDIA KINMOUTH

"IRISH COUNTRY FURNITURE 1700-1950"

published by Yale University Press. ISBN 0 300 05574 9.
256 p.p 320 illustrations 1993 £29.95

A long time we have waited for this book. At last it has arrived. The Ultimate. The definitive book of Irish Country Furniture. But is it?

We talked about 'the book' for long enough. We gathered photographs, watched eagerly for articles in all sorts of publications from flashy 'country life' types to musty old pamphlets on Irish Folklore. We went through old black and white slides in libraries and visited museums. At last our forbearance has been rewarded.

Congratulations to Claudia, she has done it. A Trojan work that I can fully empathise with. Wonderful photographs, with a remarkable sense of colour, of brilliantly painted furniture in original settings, mostly taken by herself. Some sharp close up details of scratch carvings, dentil mouldings and scumble paintwork. A fascinating photograph shows multi-layers of paint on a chairback, each coat is cleverly peeled off to reveal the next.

Along with coloured photographs we find some unusual black and white ones. Most from well known collections but some from very interesting, unknown and unpublished sources. Using old illustrations from papers, engravings from old travel books and reproductions of early sketches and oil paintings by Irish Artists, she cleverly draws conclusions as to uses, places and dates of different items of country furniture. Altogether photographs, sketches, reproductions and illustrations amount to an impressive 320 entries.

The text is a different story. Most items are covered but laboriously. Even though I am a great fan of all aspects of Irish Folklife I found the going tough. The lengthy captions on all the photographs/illustrations are repeated in the text.

On the positive side, I love the chapter on beds, very descriptive and historically correct. Also some of her personal observations are refreshing and worth noting, for example, "coastal regions of Ireland seem to be more closely linked with overseas neighbours than with inland Ireland". This has far reaching connotations, investigated previously by Bob Quinn in "Atlantis", who suggests that Irish traditional singing has strong connections with Morocco. I met an old man whose father, during the 1st World War, found himself stranded on a beach in Brittany. Crawling to the nearest house for help he thought he was at home when he saw a cleddy on the wall. But I digress.

I am a great believer in things moving perpetually in circles. Regularly I hear of people doing up old stone houses and refurnishing them with old country furniture. Or indeed, local people pulling out the old dresser from the wall, getting it stripped and restored

and putting it right back in again. Which brings me right slap bang to Claudia's biggest gripe with dealers. "dealers of Irish furniture have since the 1960's persisted in stripping down painted items rather than attempting the more skilled and expensive work of surface restoration. Ironically this destructive practice continues despite current demand for ancient looking distressed paintwork". This time I must admit I agree with her, but with reservations. She goes on to say that we should accept all this multi-coloured painting of pine "as a phenomenon of Ireland's unique material culture". That's okay, says I, but she should also accept that the stripped and waxed look is also a "phenomenon of Ireland's unique" etc. The dealers did not suddenly decide to strip pine. The general public with the help of the fashion at the time, wanted that stripped look. Dealers were only supplying that look and reflecting the general public's need.

Another aspect not mentioned enough in her book is the very recent introduction of paint in Irish country furniture. Granted she talks with great authority on scumble work, exquisite wood graining and marbling. But I maintain that these are very much the exception than the rule. I quote from a lovely article written in "Ireland's Own", July 1940 (Reminiscences of Miss M Delaney, Waterford), entitled "Our Dresser". It begins, "Our dresser was an old fashioned ponderous type, the kind that was washed down for Christmas.....", later, "pandemonium reigned the day we painted the dresser. I was kept at home from school to mind the baby, for my mother fancied herself as a painter and always did these sort of jobs herself. I remember feeling very sorry as each dark red daub blotted out the creamy purity of the deal - like the way one watches hair fall from the hairdressers scissors. Then followed a nightmare day while it was drying....". This was obviously its first coat of paint - ever. I rest my case.

A big omission is the lack of research on regional styles. Granted, on most illustrations and on all her photographs, mention is made as to where found, but no more. No effort is made to slot different styles with different regions. For example the Kerry and the Galway dresser are as different as chalk is to cheese. The Kerry dresser invariably has an open base and never has shoe feet. Whilst the Galway dresser invariably has no drawers and always has bottom doors and nearly always has shoe feet. What about the dresser with the projecting top hood found only in West Mayo? And on and on! Nor is any study done on Irish emigrants influence on for example American country furniture? A million a decade emigrated from Ireland during the last century to all corners of the world. These people must have brought skills and influences with them to their newly adopted country. This I realise, could be a whole study in itself.

The shoe foot mentioned above sparks off another huge controversy, whether it is called a sledge, boot or shoe foot, is not the issue. What is much more interesting is where the idea or the style came from. Most researchers, Claudia included, call it a mediaeval design, originating

in England and Scotland (where incidentally it is no longer seen!) and working its way to Ireland through Ulster and down along the West Coast, but stopping for reasons best known to itself, in Co. Clare, where it is unknown. This I can vouch for myself. But I question all this. I have photographs of Spanish country furniture with exactly similar shoe feet. What would be wrong with the theory that it originated in Spain and worked its way to the West of Ireland and along up through Ulster and into Scotland and finally landing in England?

The use of old oil painting and illustrations to identify furniture as well as folklife material is skillfully done. This whole concept is fascinating and has a huge documentary value. Claudia mentions spongeware displayed on dressers, along with noggins, trenchers, salt boxes on the wall, a bird in a cage, butter boxes as seats and on it goes. Sometimes she notes extraordinary things like a small corner of a cradle peeping out from behind a mob of people in an inn in Co. Kerry. In a street photograph she picks out beds and styles of cradles with meticulous detail. Sometimes she gets carried away by all this. A turf spade leaning against a wall establishes the area as Co. Galway. Sleans or turf spades vary in style from bog to bog rather than on a country basis. Other small inaccuracies not necessarily to do with furniture i.e., 'rush lights were made with fish oil held in a small lamp called cruise'. Rush lights were just that, for holding peeled rushes dipped in mutton fat and had no relation to the cruise lamp. But this is nit picking and I will desist. A glaring inaccuracy is in her assessment of the availability of the press-bed. I quote "it is disappointing that so few have survived, although about a dozen examples have been discovered dotted around Ireland". I guarantee I could find more than a dozen examples in the parish I live in, no mind the rest of Ireland!! Great credit is due for the amount of makers of furniture that she discovered. Over forty named from all over the country. What a pity photographs of these people, along with their work could not be provided.

The Gazetteer at the back of the book has a few interesting entries. But it has a huge omission. It does not mention Newbridge House, Donobate, Co. Dublin. The basement of this house, along with its lofts and out houses are just choc-a-bloc with superb examples of Irish Country Furniture.

But it is a lot easier to criticise this book than it would be to attempt to assemble it. Great credit must be given for what must have taken months of research, painstakingly carried out up and down the country. Knocking on doors with a camera and tripod slung over your shoulder was indeed a difficult task! This fine book is a must for all country furniture enthusiasts.

Dabheoc Rynne