

THE PORTABLE EMPIRE

Available from Christopher Clarke Antiques,
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This catalogue was produced by Christopher Clarke Antiques to accompany an exhibition of 18th, 19th and 20th century campaign furniture and travel equipment in October 2003. It builds upon the high standard set by a similar exhibition in 2002, *At Ease Gentlemen*, that won 'The British Antiques and Collectables Award' for 'Best In-house Exhibition'. As with the 2002 catalogue, the effort that has gone into *The Portable Empire* justifies its value beyond the temporary nature of an exhibition.

Along with furniture the catalogue contains a vast range of items as diverse as pocket cutlery sets and mess plates, portable spurs, a boot lacing rest and travelling inkwells. All of the eighty-eight exhibits are illustrated in colour with detailed descriptions, and around half are pieces of furniture specifically designed for portability; the minimum possible compromise to the aesthetics of the stationary versions from which they derive is apparent in many examples. A large number of the pieces are shown both assembled and 'knocked down' making the mechanics of their construction clear. In many instances the furniture is attributable to known makers, and in several cases provenanced owners. The furniture encompasses the sophisticated, such as an elegant Sheraton period secretaire table with detachable legs, as well as the utilitarian like towel rails and folding washstands. A collapsible mahogany bidet, portable shower and figured mahogany campaign commode (complete with integral plumbing and padded leather seat) give interesting glimpses as to the extent with which home comforts were adapted for transportation around the globe.



Fig 2 The oak altar table of 1610 from Kilbrogan church, Bandon, Co. Cork (courtesy of Duchas: The Heritage Service)

The non-furniture items included in the catalogue help place the furniture into the wider context for which it was made. An engraving of the 7th Hussars in their Brighton headquarters dated 1844 provides an interesting example of the comfortable surroundings that campaign furniture was intended to preserve in far flung places. The

practicalities of transporting such comforts are amusingly revealed in an eighteen section hand coloured lithograph of the 12th Bengal Lancers on the line of march, complete with chairs dangling from porters shoulders and precariously perched upon a stubborn camel refusing to take another step regardless of a harshly prodding rifle.

The range of exhibits in this catalogue, including makers' and suppliers' labels and advertisements, gives some idea of the scale of the market that the British Empire created for campaign and travel furniture. In the introduction Nicholas Brawer, author of *British Campaign Furniture: Elegance Under Canvas, 1740-1914*, illustrates its magnitude with the example of Captain Hope Grant of the 9th Lancers who required ninety three porters to carry his military and musical equipment into the hills. There are clear implications regarding the dissemination of designs around the globe, and examples in the catalogue of items of colonial origin made for this market that would ultimately find their way to Britain, suggest the development of that exchange into a two way conversation.

The Portable Empire might have been created as a catalogue for a temporary exhibition, but the range of items it brings together, the effort that has gone into their descriptions and the quality of its production should continue to make it a useful reference for anyone interested in the history of campaign furniture and travel equipment together with the culture that generated it.

Chris Currie