

Richard Bebb, *Welsh Furniture 1250 – 1950, A Cultural History of Craftsmanship and Design* (2 vols in slip-case), Saer Books, 31-33 Bridge Street, Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire SA17 4UU (£150); special collector's edition of 350 copies, numbered and signed, bound in half-leather with cloth box (£350).

The launch of Richard Bebb's long-awaited magnum opus, after 16 years in the making, brings to an end a much longer dearth of any major scholarly work on this subject. Johnes and Twiston-Davies's *Welsh Furniture* actually appeared 57 years ago. It provided a range of examples across the spectrum, and did much honour to the quality of Welsh craftsmanship, but in scale and perception it does not serve present-day needs. Welsh items have been included in some standard works since then, and the last 20 years have seen much research and a number of scholarly articles on the subject published in journals such as *Regional Furniture* and *Collector's Guide*, but we have had to wait until now for the big publishing gap to be filled. A major work was always anticipated, but not even the author originally envisaged covering 700 years, across the whole social spectrum of his country. He has drawn upon and acknowledged recent researches by others, some published, but the entirety of the book is overwhelmingly his own work.

The book is chronological, but the introduction and first chapter of Volume 1 cover the historical, geographical and

social background, with sections on research methods, materials and wood-working generally. He begins the book with a comprehensive survey of previous references to Welsh furniture.

He immediately gets to grips with the recurring theme throughout the book, namely, the 'top down' approach of past furniture historians, whereby Welsh, and British regional furniture generally, has been judged as it relates to fashionable metropolitan patterns. These are accepted criteria at aristocratic and gentry levels, but seriously inhibiting in recognising indigenous forms and designs. The thesis of the book, then, is to examine the whole subject from the late middle ages in a spirit of scholarly enquiry, identifying the indigenous forms and designs developed by Welsh furniture makers, who also absorbed and adapted outside influences from various sources.

The end result of this long journey through the subject is a deeply researched and comprehensive coverage of all the historic forms and styles of Welsh furniture, its making and its ownership at all social levels, copiously illustrated throughout, with text and pictures co-ordinated on the pages. Written in the straightforward style of his *Regional Furniture* articles, it makes compulsive reading.

The two handsome volumes are divided into eight long chapters, subdivided for easy reference. They amply provide the comprehensive pictorial reference so long needed by collectors and historians alike; picture quality is good overall, with some loss of definition only in a few smaller images. The almost total use of colour enables the full variety of furniture surfaces to be properly seen, often advantageously in domestic settings.

The bedrock upon which the thesis is built is the identified continuity of Welsh wood-working traditions, from the middle ages and earlier to the 20th century. Continuous, too, is the ancient Celtic iconography of 'commas, dot and circles, intertwining, strap-work, vine trails and paired serpents' which come vividly to light in the early carved furniture and fixed woodwork and carry on, mainly in the form of comma patterns, to enrich inlays and fret-work up to the 20th century.

The craftsmen emerge throughout as valued members of society, whether serving the courts of the medieval rulers,



Fig 1. Oak chair from the Conwy valley, initialled and dated RM 1664.



Fig 2. Oak coffer bach from Kidwelly, Carmarthenshire c.1750-80, 29in. (74cm wide).

or the great estates of Tudor and Stuart times, but particularly in their status in the rural communities of the 18th and 19th centuries, where gentry influence was in decline. Here they are revealed as ranging from amateur or part-time farmer, to full-time workshops. Often people of education and broad interests, and combining furniture-making with other rural crafts, they produced finely made and beautifully designed items, with infinite variations on standard forms, frequently from districts which now seem remote to us. It is this rural social background particularly, where the farmsteads were the centres of social life and furniture was made for the maker's own social groups, which contributed to the endless variety of styles and decoration which we value so highly today. The dwellings of both the country and later industrial communities are described in detail and illustrated with contemporary pictures.

The furnishings of the upper gentry of the 18th and 19th centuries, and of the burgeoning middle classes, are covered mainly in so far as they employed Welsh cabinet makers, and the author scans this subject more lightly, involving as it does the adaptation of international fashionable styles. And so on, into the high-quality urban firms and the furnishing emporia of the Victorian age and beyond, where Welsh firms worked to homogenised designs. Parallel, however, was the continuing demand, into the 20th century, for traditional forms which were still as serviceable as they ever were in rural communities, and which the author examines in appropriate detail. Welsh craftsmen also contributed to the arts and crafts movement, the later fashions for carving, and so on. Finally, Bebb explores the 20th century middle-class love of the traditional pieces, up to the present day, when Welsh furniture continues to be iconic, valued and collected, but until now so little understood.

This book is in fact the social history of Wales seen through its furniture, including historical texts, detailed studies of selected houses and families, and biographies of individual craftsmen and firms. It is a masterpiece of regional study, and because it applies to a whole country, it has international appeal. The author's conclusions are summarised mainly in the last chapter of the second volume where, appropriately, he challenges some long-held views on the subject.

Bebb's huge volume of research and sheer number of examples should earn the respect of furniture historians and the gratitude of his fellow-countrymen, to whom he has rendered a notable service. The thesis is complete, but in filling in the 50-year gap in published Welsh furniture history, this book provides not just a comprehensive study but a foundation for future work and debate.

Luke Millar