

**The Knight of Glin and James Peill, *Irish Furniture: Woodwork and Carving in Ireland from the Earliest Times to the Act of Union*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007 (£50).**

The label 'Irish' has for too long been a convenient one to apply to furniture that is quirky and does not fit readily into other known categories. At last the record can be put straight. Published in the same year as Richard Bebb's *Welsh Furniture*, two major gaps in regional furniture history have finally been filled and, given the loss of so much material through Ireland's troubled history, this has been accomplished with admirable scholarship and thoroughness. Desmond FitzGerald (The Knight of Glin) has been collecting photographs and building up an archive since the 1960s, but the project finally became reality when James Peill, from Christie's furniture department, joined him in collaboration.

The first part of the book describes chronologically the development of Irish furniture and woodwork (architectural fittings are included) from medieval times until 1800, with a brief survey of the 19th century to which is added the promise of a companion volume by Angela Alexander on this latter period. The furniture is usefully set in an historical context, focussing in the 18th century on the main houses, their patrons and the major craftsmen involved.

Although it can be difficult at times to be certain about what was imported from London and what made in Ireland, particularly in the 17th century and during the neoclassical period (in the latter case because of the use of English pattern books), even a cursory look through this volume will soon give a feeling for some of the distinctly Irish forms, particularly on cabinets and mirrors; the heavy aprons on mid-18th century side tables with their rich, flamboyant carving, and the distinctive feet, splats and flat stretchers of chairs are examples.

We are, of course, dealing here with the furniture of the élite, the more humble, vernacular furnishings of the masses having already been well covered by Claudia Kinmonth's book of 1993. Yet it is admitted that the majority of pieces discussed in this new volume were the production of Dublin workshops, as opposed to provincial towns such as Cork, Limerick and Waterford. There is scope for further work on these. Another useful sideline which will surely lead to further discussion, broached at the end of chapter 5, is the influence of Irish craftsmen on the American colonies.

The second section is a pictorial gazetteer of furniture types from the 17th to the early 19th century, divided up into seat furniture, tables and stands, case furniture and mirrors. This offers stylistic comparisons, based on some 250 photographs drawn from around 2000 images in the

Glin archive: largely pieces in public or provenanced collections. Although one is grateful for the details included, and indeed the new photography undertaken for the book, it is here that it shares the unfortunate defect of too many modern publications, of too many small illustrations that are hard to study closely. A few more pages with larger pictures would have done them greater justice. Given this, it is also a shame that a number of the colour plates are repeated on a large scale.

Finally, there is a very useful appendix of the details of over 900 Irish furniture makers under three headings, gleaned from newspaper advertisements and other contemporary sources by John Rogers and part of much wider, ongoing research. This serves to show the considerable scale of Irish furniture-making, although pitifully few surviving pieces are actually marked or labelled, with the slight exception of mirrors. However we should add our influence to the plea voiced in the introduction, for a major exhibition on Irish decorative arts to celebrate and bring to a wider audience the wealth of splendid work that has been produced in Ireland, and its idiosyncratic nature.

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