

Scottish Vernacular Furniture

Lecture by Dr Bernard Cotton at Lyon and Turnbull, Edinburgh, 20 September 2008

Bernard (Bill) Cotton's book, *Scottish Vernacular Furniture*, was launched with an exhibition, *In Search of Scottish Furniture*, in the showrooms of Edinburgh auctioneers Lyon and Turnbull, from 26 August to 24 September 2008. The exhibition was curated by Bill and brought together significant pieces from public and private collections to show the distinctive characteristics of highland and lowland vernacular furniture. Bill was invited by the RFS to give a lecture and tour of the exhibition and some 50 people, mainly members of our Scottish regional group, but one or two from south of the border too, were rewarded with an excellent talk and an opportunity to examine the furniture in the company of several experts.

In his lecture Bill explained how the study of Scottish vernacular traditions had been pioneered by Dr Isabel Grant, who founded the Highland Folk Museum in the 1940s with a significant collection of items which were then of little interest to most historians and no real value within the auction market.

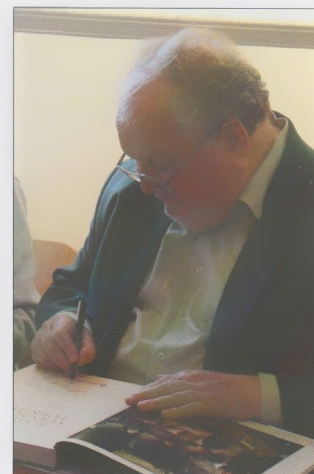
Scottish furniture could be best understood in the context of the regional economic conditions, which were very different in the highlands and lowlands. The highland clearances had destroyed much of the material culture and Bill, assisted by his wife Gerry and Gerald Cole, had resorted to seeking furniture on the remote island of Stroma in the Pentland Firth, abandoned in the 1960s. Inside the remaining crofts they recorded 19th century box beds, chairs, and other items. Early crofts, known as blackhouses because they had a central hearth with no chimney and no windows, were built with double walls of stone with the cavity filled with moss and earth; the thatched roof drained onto the top of the wall, keeping the filling damp and therefore draught-proof. There was little room for furniture; a settle against one wall and a dresser opposite, the top sloping to allow drips from the thatch to run off, low chairs made of found timber of suitable shape and creepie stools to sit below the smoke layer. Later crofts, whitehouses, were built with a chimney and hearth on the gable wall, the thatch overhung the walls and there were windows. In both types the houses were long and narrow, designed to shelter people in one end and animals in the other.

In the lowlands, by contrast, the houses were built with a tiled roof, a hearth and

chimney on the gable wall and there were separate buildings for livestock. The variety of furniture was greater. The artist Walter Geikie recorded some of these interiors in the early 19th century, showing the arrangement of furniture and revealing details of domestic life which would otherwise be lost. The typical lowland dresser has no top board and often incorporates a row of narrow drawers mid-way across the top section, and was designed more for the display of china than for food preparation. Cradles might have a hood formed of bent wood and turned laburnum knobs along each side to allow tapes to be tied across the top to prevent the baby being tipped out, or perhaps to ward off the fairies intent on replacing the baby with a changeling. Other items included the kist, or chest, with a hinged lid top and two drawers below; a lum chest with the characteristic central drawer flanked by two smaller drawers on either side and three or four long drawers below; and chairs which often followed fashionable forms published by Chippendale and others but were distinctively Scottish in their detailing and in the use of locally available timbers.

There can be no doubt that Bill has a masterly command of his subject and delights in sharing his knowledge with others, and is continually eager to learn. This was an opportunity for those present to engage with his enthusiasm and we hope this book will open the study of Scottish traditional furniture to a wider pool of historians.

David Dewing



Bill Cotton signing copies of his book in Edinburgh



Exhibition *In Search of Scottish Furniture* at Lyon and Turnbull, Edinburgh, 2008