

Dr. Bernard D. Cotton, *Scottish Vernacular Furniture*, Thames and Hudson, 2008 (£48.00).

The long awaited publication of this major work from Dr Bernard 'Bill' Cotton marks a significant addition to the catalogue of publications available for regional furniture studies. It is one that all those interested in the subject will undoubtedly be eager to consult and it complements other substantial works covering Welsh and Irish vernacular furniture that have appeared in recent years. It is the culmination of 40 years of research in which the author's wife, Gerry, has shared and been a constant support.

The book is beautifully produced and systematically laid out in a logical sequence. An introductory section outlining the aims of the study, the sources used and methodology employed is followed by 16 pages providing geographical, architectural, economic, social and cultural contexts within which the Scottish vernacular furniture discussed in the subsequent pages was produced. This includes a number of examples of workshops and craftsmen that made it, from cottage industries to large factories; others are considered in greater detail as they arise in the following sections of the book.

A brief overview of timbers commonly used, some of which are highly diagnostic of Scottish furniture, completes the introduction (a dozen timbers are explored in greater detail in an appendix of woods used in Scottish furniture). An extensive bibliography reveals the breadth of material drawn upon to produce this book; the significant number of contributions cited from *Regional Furniture* and by Regional Furniture Society members bears testimony to the activity of the society and its membership over the years and the part they have played in this publication.

The introduction provides a valuable backdrop for the main body of work which is broken down into four major sections defined by the uses to which the furniture they cover was put, namely, sleeping; storage and display; seating and a miscellaneous section for clocks, spinning wheels and 'household goods'. In turn these are divided into sub-sections for specific forms, functions and often regional variations. By way of example, the 'Storage and Display' section includes a sub-section on dressers which is divided further into highland dressers, dressers without cupboards, aumrie dressers, dressers from the northern isles, and lowland dressers.

It will come as little surprise to those knowing the author that the section on seating furniture fills a greater portion of this book than any other, around half of its pages. This is probably necessitated in part by the quantity and accessibility of chairs available for study compared to other forms of furniture and their particular qualities for displaying variations in form and style; it possibly also reflects Dr. Cotton's particular preference, experience and

skills in analysing chairs. This imbalance does not obstruct the inclusion of many thoroughly researched and analysed findings relating to other forms of furniture. The numerous items discussed readily impart a clear understanding of distinctive groups and sub-groups of Scottish beds, cradles, kists, aumries, presses, dressers and hanging shelves, corner cupboards, chests of drawers and tables. The reasons these items took their variant forms is clearly explained and constant referral to period illustrations and accounts discloses how many pieces were originally used and positioned in relationship to each other and their surroundings.

Most sections are very thorough; however, a section on clocks is somewhat brief by comparison to the others. Although different styles of clock cases from the main centres of production in the Glasgow and Edinburgh areas are described in the text and other centres of production are referred to in passing, only one Scottish case is clearly illustrated. Some compensation is offered by the inclusion of several dials, one clearly showing a cabinetmaker working at his bench with an array of tools and items under construction, including a clock case. A section on spinning wheels is more thorough and gives a useful overview of the various processes, wheels and other items involved in the production of linen and woollen yarn that was a part of everyday life in many Scottish homes. It will be a helpful introduction for some readers.

The adoption of a primarily 'function' led layout for this study, as opposed to perhaps a chronological or regional emphasis, results in this being a particularly easy book, for its size, to navigate. This accessibility is significantly aided by an abundance of images which, being high in ratio to the number of pages and generally of large format, makes this an extremely 'visual' book, many pages consisting of just images and captions. The quality of photography (largely by the author) and reproduction of other pictures are both extremely good.

A policy of providing highly detailed captions to every image means that by skimming through, identifying relevant images and consulting their captions, a considerable amount of information can be extracted from this book with remarkable ease. This ability to 'surf' through its pages will undoubtedly enhance its appeal to a wide audience while also making it a very user friendly source of reference. For those wishing to delve deeper, the clearly written and well referenced text skilfully threads through the 'visual level' binding it into a cohesive study, and painstaking layout work has ensured that images are invariably placed on the same page as the appropriate accompanying text, making it easy to switch from one level to the other. The clear numbering and exhaustive cross-referencing of related images in different sections of

the book further enhance this process. A minor compromise resulting from this editorial and layout strategy is that the reader approaching the whole text in a thorough and systematic way is likely to find a number of the key themes repeated regularly.

The introduction clearly states the aims of the book and its scope, both in terms of time span and the nature of furniture considered 'vernacular'. The latter is defined as 'the domestic furniture of the majority..... [having] at its core the notion of utility – furniture that is primarily useful rather than decorative'. While a realistic need to broaden this definition to accommodate the infiltration of fashionable influences into such furniture is acknowledged and catered for, broadly the furniture discussed conforms to these criteria.

The time frame for the study is set from the end of the 17th century through into the 20th. In actuality there is a heavy bias towards the later end of this and while earlier sources are sometimes referred to, around 90% of the items illustrated carry date attributions after 1800. In this light, the few examples (all chairs) that predate 1700, included under the pretext of precursors of later styles, seem somewhat isolated in time from the main body of work. This narrow time frame for the study probably, to some extent, reflects the availability of readily accessible sources and surviving examples. It is not necessarily a shortcoming as arguably it has resulted in a more focussed study than others have achieved by ambitiously taking on far broader periods in studies elsewhere. It does however mean that the earlier periods remain to be explored and that the longevity of the traditions recorded in this book are largely conjectural.

From the outset clearly defined highland and lowland zones are established, each subject to differing natural, cultural and economic forces. These influences are readily acknowledged but without succumbing to the temptation of allowing them to become sole defining factors shaping the furniture of their communities. For example, a predominance in the highlands of open hearth 'black houses' that engendered specific forms of furniture is not allowed to discount the fact that white houses with chimneys, as common in the lowlands, were also found there – or that black houses were improved over time.

That Dr Cotton has selected 'vernacular' over 'regional' furniture as the primary qualifying attribute for this study is a distinction that has left freedom to explore style, form and tradition without a prerequisite of seeking neat geographical pigeon holes by which to delineate his findings. This has in no way prevented him from establishing numerous regional and local characteristics within the items studied including their overall form, individual decorative details, constructional techniques

and materials employed. In many instances these are quite localised and labelled by region, county or occasionally town. However, through being discussed alongside comparable items from elsewhere in Scotland the defining qualities of these regional groups are free to interact and overlap with those of others, their similarities and differences be compared, and their individual traditions to form part of a wider culture; their dialects to share a common language.

This 'fluid' approach permits a great deal of freedom in exploring the subtler forces that influenced furniture design and leads one to consider whether they were experienced in common across some or all regions, or with unique qualities in individual locations. Factors like relative wealth; domestic routines; social customs; diet; working routines; beliefs and superstitions, and the availability of local and imported materials are studied using a wide range of methods and sources including oral history; contemporary travellers' journals; literature; newspapers; government records (such as statistical accounts and census material); inventories, and many contemporary paintings, sketches and photographs that show furniture in its original domestic context. The result is a revealing study of clear regional and local styles, types and forms of furniture, that are firmly integrated within a national tradition while also exposed to international influences. Thus, localised groups of chairs from the northern isles revealing Scandinavian influences in their pierced splats can be seen to share distinctive leg and back profiles that consistently appear elsewhere in Scotland, even on fashionably aware Chippendale-influenced chairs made from Scottish laburnum in the eastern lowlands.

Regional furniture studies are a specialised outpost on the fringes of social history and material culture. As fields of study like this develop there is a real danger that they might engender works of ever-increasing magnification, zooming in closer and closer on fine detail and generating articles of reference appealing to an ever decreasing audience. While by no means ignoring the detail, the broad contextual approach taken by Dr Cotton in *Scottish Vernacular Furniture* avoids such a trap and is likely to attract a wide audience, including many with little or no former exposure to furniture history. By emphasising the 'why' of furniture rather than just the 'what', this book is a fine example of how highly specialised studies can avoid becoming obsessive indulgences and justify themselves a role in advancing the wider understanding of everyday life in the past.

Chris Currie