

Claudia Kinmonth, *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2020). 548 pp., 448 illus. ISBN 9781782054054. Hardback.

This is a considerably revised and extended edition of the author's publication *Irish Country Furniture 1700–1950* (1993). It adds new material from her continuing fieldwork and research, many more illustrations and a full chapter on small furnishings and utensils. It also extends the period covered to include the second half of the twentieth century. A smaller page format has been chosen, which makes it a thick volume (547 pages and a further 24 in the Foreword and Preface etc.) but the page layout is much improved, as is the choice of fonts for the main text, titles and captions, making it easier to read and digest. The greatest change is the marked increase in the quantity and quality of illustrations, increased from 320 to 444, with a higher proportion now printed in colour, which makes the book both more attractive and informative. There are alterations and additions to the text throughout, giving evidence of a thorough review and update, all of which make this edition even more authoritative and comprehensive than the first.

The methodology adopted by Kinmonth is an object lesson in regional furniture studies. Unusually for scholars today, she has been able to capture evidence first-hand from possibly the last generation of people in the British Isles to live in an essentially pre-industrial state, when many time-honoured traditions were still in play: she could talk to people who cooked over a peat fire every day, stored their meal in a chest, shared their house with hens and other animals, and made the best of enforced frugality with ingenuity and by wasting nothing. The pace of change in Ireland, which accelerated in the 1980s during the period of the 'Celtic Tiger' and has continued into the present, makes this study of the country's vernacular traditions in furniture and furnishings all the more vital, before the first-hand evidence slips away entirely. Elsewhere in Britain the industrial age and economic and social progress have long overtaken living memory of this way of life, but here the author has made the best of her opportunity. Conversely, of course, Irish country life was never well

documented, so the archival evidence is patchy. Government reports and the observations of travellers offer useful contemporary descriptions of living conditions. Poetry, folk songs, paintings and prints are in many ways more illuminating, and these the author has used to the full, but documents like household inventories, wills, parish records, workshop records, bills, letters, sketches, notebooks and diaries were less common in a society where the majority of country people were both poor and unschooled.

Kinmonth's careful observation and detailed enquiry have given her a remarkable understanding of the context of Irish country furniture, such that each chapter not only examines the variations of, for example, chairs or dressers, but also analyses the reasons for the differences in materials, methods of making, and uses within the home, often multiple uses which are intricately linked to the daily lives and activities of the household. The basic structure of this edition is as before, with the subject matter divided by types of furniture rather than by region or chronology. The book is essentially about furniture and furnishings but in truth it records many aspects of rural life in Ireland: how food was prepared and eaten, where people slept, and how they coped in conditions of extreme poverty. The final chapter, Small Furnishings and Utensils, adds new material on many of the domestic items which were in daily use but were almost ephemeral, such as tinware, horn spoons, earthenware crocks, noggins, basketry and flour bags. These have been studied with the same meticulous attention to detail as the furniture, and in some cases have helped to make further sense of it, such as the holes in a dresser shelf where horn spoons were hung to dry, away from mice and rats.

Since Irish country furniture was generally made by tradesmen whose primary skills might have been as wheelwrights, boatbuilders or thatchers for example, or often by householders, rather than by specialists within a furniture-making tradition and established workshops, very little can be identified to individual makers. There are regional distinctions and these are discussed briefly in the Introduction and alluded to throughout the book: 'Idiosyncrasies in furniture, like variations in patterns of speech, differed greatly and distinctively between one

CLAUDIA KINMONTH

Irish Country Furniture
and Furnishings
1700–2000



Cover by kind permission of Cork
University Press.

region, or maker, and the next.' It would have been interesting and useful to have this examined more fully, perhaps in a separate chapter explaining why and how certain features and types of furniture predominated in one region or another for reasons such as geography, economy, religion and trade.

The great strength of the book is that it presents a vivid account of the common peoples' experience of daily life and how this was supported by their furniture and furnishings. In furniture studies we often take the daily life for granted and focus on the object as a product, but where people are forced to live with the bare necessities, we can see most clearly that the furniture they have is born of that very necessity and is therefore elemental in its functionality. That doesn't make it simple, or naive; its form, materials and construction and any decoration have often evolved over many generations and it is precisely tuned to the needs of the household. It has, as the author says, a functionalism and purity which has no heroes (in designers, craftsmen or owners). To understand it fully is to know how it was used within the living space.

Kinmonth began her research during her MA at the RCA/V&A in 1988 and this edition is now the fruit of over three decades of study of original and published sources, of paintings and prints, of houses and their contents and above all of people and their memories. The author's depth of knowledge is combined with a clarity in both analysis and explanation which makes the

book both scholarly and accessible. It will surely stand as the most authoritative and sensitive account of Irish country furniture for generations to come and we have much to thank her for.

David Dewing