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Irish Country Furniture and Furnishing 1700-2000 by Claudia Kinmonth

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BOOK REVIEW

Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700-2000, by Claudia Kinmonth, Cork: Cork University Press, 2020, 546pp., ISBN 9781782054054.



So many readers in Ireland and abroad will connect with this book, as it depicts the lives of many of our families, a few generations ago. Some of us have found our relatives in the 1901 and 1911 censuses and looked at the associated House and Building Return form, which details the type of walls and roof of each house, the numbers of windows to the front and the amount of rooms inside. Sadly, the records do not reveal the type of furniture and furnishings that were within (this would have made Kinmonth's extensive research so much easier). She visually fills the rooms for us—we see what furniture we might expect to have seen in that traditional home.

As we concern ourselves today with a new focus on sustainability, conservation, reusing, recycling and the currently popular upcycling, this book is an inspiration and joy to read; all of these were normal in the traditional life of furniture. Claudia Kinmonth's *Irish Country Furniture and Furnishings 1700-2000* is a lavishly illustrated publication by Cork University Press (her previous books were published by Yale University Press). This is an update on her 1993 seminal publication, *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950*, combining it with her expert research for *Rural Interiors in Irish Art*, published in 2006.

This new book includes many of the photographs from her fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s and her research afterwards. The author has often commented that as soon as she published a book on furniture, people alerted her to additional material. The photographs are combined with her study of paintings and drawings that give us early representations of the inside of Irish homes, which were too dark inside for early photography, and brings us right up-to-date with her most recent research which is found in the final chapter.

The foreword to this book was written by Professor Louis M. Cullen FBA MRIA, who describes how nine chapters in 1993 have been extended to ten, and 320

illustrations have been extended to 450. He also gives the background to Kinmonth's research, which stemmed from her MA in Design at the Royal College of Art in London. The practical nature of her studies included woodwork; in addition, she is an excellent craftsperson. Images of her own early kitchens and furniture are found in Nancy Hillier's recent article, "Claudia Kinmonth, Maverick Furniture Scholar" posted on 7 March 2021 on the blog of *Lost Art Press* (<https://blog.lostartpress.com>). This also featured photographs of Kinmonth as a child spending summers in Co. Cork.

Her choice to focus on Irish furniture is because of her Irish father. In fact, in this book she gives us information on her great-grandfather, who was a "Poultry and Game Shipper": "The author's great-grandfather William Kinmonth's business was established in Cork in 1850, buying poultry, eggs and feathers for export to England. His frequent advertisements, addressed to poultry keepers, reveal which west Cork market towns he would purchase in, on specific days" (p.227, p.230, p.428). This information is pertinent to the discussion of stand-alone hencoops and their incorporation into dressers. Keeping poultry in the home, especially during winter, ensured the continued production of eggs. Sales of eggs, butter and poultry allowed an often-lucrative income. Traditionally, these were the earnings of farm women and used by them to purchase other necessities.

The book has a wonderful introduction to the subject of traditional furniture: types of homes, what furniture existed and what survived, wood types, recycling, designs. Readers learn about shell, scallop, marigold and heart designs, cupid bow skirts and fiddle fronts, along with techniques and terms (the reader will, for example, forever recognise chamfering "indicating a wheelwright's work"). What I really loved is Kinmonth's insight into the people who crafted the pieces. A focus of the Irish Folklife Collection of the National Museum of Ireland, of which I am Keeper, are the lives of the people associated with an object. The furniture owners feature in both the text and the photographs of the collection, but here Kinmonth places the makers centre stage.

Prior to the building of bungalows in the 1960s and 1970s, there was a similarity in the type of houses in rural Ireland. One- or two-storey homes were focused around the hearth, positioned either in the centre of the house or at the gable end. Then, depending on wealth, houses were furnished with more or less the typical pieces that allow us to live, eat and sleep.

The first nine chapters share the same titles as the author's 1993 book. The first two deal with seating: single occupancy stools and chairs are the focus of Chapter One, whereas the larger pieces are covered in Chapter Two on settles. The ingenious settle bed allowed several sitters at once, and could be slept on (open frame settles), or slept in, when it opened like a box. Unique to Ireland, they are also found where the Irish emigrated and settled (!) in North America, including in a museum in Montréal.

Dressers, ware and display are the focus of Chapter Three. The colour and quantity of images of the dresser and its physical survival in so many homes highlights its

importance and status in the traditional home. It exhibited the wealth of the home, even if the objects on show were seldom used (Kinmonth discusses the cracked or chipped delph displayed with their best side forward). The placing of the aspirational large meat platters (most often with willow pattern transfer design), jugs hanging on hooks, plates tilting forward (avoiding dust and reflecting light) are all discussed. We also encounter bowls “whammelled” or placed upside down and often on top of each other along with the author’s discovery of shelves incorporating holders for spoons on some dressers. Dressers with open storage areas at their base, the glassing in of the upper areas of some dressers, dressers that form partition walls, dressers that incorporate coops, and even one that was adapted to fit the television set, all feature. The colour image of Peig Sayers standing beside her colourful dresser full of assorted glassware will be a treasured one for many readers.

With bland greys and muted beiges popular in kitchen design today, our ancestors’ daringness and boldness in the use of colour puts us to shame. “Storage of Food and Clothes” is the title of Chapter Four, and keeping holes, stillions (cold stone shelves for storing water or milk pails), built-in presses near the hearth, meal chests, and food presses, are all discussed. From a personal perspective, it was a nice surprise to see what I remembered as “the blue food press,” (based on the colour of its last layer of paint); a large pine press with four doors in the Irish Folklife Collection. I pass this every day in our Museum store; today it is no longer blue and white. Its many layers of paint were stripped ahead of its exhibition at Collins Barracks in 1997, revealing its first finish. Pine, as with so many cheaper woods, was painted to imitate the more expensive ones, like oak. This food press, from Ballynaclough, Co. Limerick, revealed beneath its layers the original “scumble” paint effect, which was made using graining combs while a darker layer was still wet. I had always assumed this technique was only achieved by using hair combs, but the array of “graining tools” for this purpose, illustrated on page 48, includes improvised bicycle handles, decorated tyres and imported tools. There are less pieces for storing clothes in, as unlike today, the quantity of clothing was limited and lidded chests were more common for storage. Kinmonth tells us that the chest of drawers was not a typical feature in Irish vernacular furniture. Dowry chests, however, often incorporated drawers and dovetail construction. These chests contained an array of textiles, objects, and personal items, sometimes including money, which a wife brought to her new marital home.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven concern sleeping, and how, where and on what people slept. Kinmonth discusses straw and mattresses, the alcove (bed outshot), covered car, boxed, canopy and brass beds, beds disguised as presses (which were a spare fold-away bed often kept in parlours when people could afford a seldom-used room), and cradles for infants.

Tables, and our lack of them in traditional furniture, form the discussion in Chapter Eight. There are many illustrations of mealtimes with families gathered around a three-legged pot and, on top of it, a straining basket known as a skib, filled with potatoes.

Falling tables fitted to the wall allowed more space, their use being occasional. The scrubbing white of the table top was a common feature. The layering of Formica (known in Ireland as “Beauty Board”), allowed the wooden table to continue in use well into the late twentieth century.

Chapter Nine focuses on “The Hearth and Shrine.” Coming from the English word “clavel,” meaning mantelpiece, cleavies were shelves above the hearth which combined a holder for roasting spits, and are featured in the book, as are wooden cranes. Images of “holy shelves” illustrate the devotion to Our Lady and the Sacred Heart. Kinmonth’s work and researched stories from gathered folklore about “God-in-the-Bottle” are both erudite and humorous. A home altar, which I accessioned into the Irish Folklife Collection of the National Museum of Ireland in 2006 from Walsh Island, Co. Offaly, is featured, with images of the front and the reverse (p.410). Painted blue and white at the front, the reverse of the altar reveals its unpainted construction from butter and soap boxes, and it was wallpapered with newspaper dated to 1904.

Many objects have no maker’s mark or particular date for construction. Objects especially associated with historical figures and historical events ensured their survival. Nano Nagle, the Cork-born educator of the poor, owned and used a block stool. It was kept safely and dates to the mid-1700s. A deckchair from the tragic sinking of the RMS Lusitania in 1915 was washed ashore on the Great Blasket Island. It was used in the home of Paddy Mhichil Ó Súilleabháin and survives now as an exhibit in the Blasket Centre, in County Kerry. Frugality and creativity are shown through the use of driftwood, bog oak, and súgán rope in the absence of wood. Need ensured that what items were owned were kept well and had flexibility in use for a variety of purposes.

Kinmonth takes the curatorial approach, with concise identification, personal association, history, and provenance when describing furniture in both text and image captions. Although the subjects of the first nine chapters are the same as her seminal 1993 publication, they are enhanced by her continued dedicated research, allowing a readdressing of the timespan and a change in the book title from 1950 to 2000. For each chapter there are hundreds of endnotes, (a staggering total of 894 references), which shows the author’s academic expertise behind such an easy to read book.

Kinmonth’s work as an accomplished scholar is especially evident in “Small Furnishings and Utensils,” the new Chapter 10, which had just existed as a Small Furnishings appendix in 1993. This chapter includes her recently published research on horn spoons and the craft of the horner, noggins and the craft of the noggin weaver, flour bags, and recycling. There is also a new section covering “Country Pottery and Earthenware” which references the Dandi coarse earthenware from Youghal, and glazed earthenware crocks (that have the glaze only inside and often have the yellow drip design incorporated), such as those made in Coalisland, Co. Tyrone.

The book can be appreciated for the stunning imagery alone. Kinmonth is a highly skilled photographer and in addition, her line drawings are useful for details, such as

her sketches of wall-mounted tables (p.378) and the side views of painted pine cleaves (p.401). She combines all of these with early newspaper drawings and those for books by artists such as Ida Flower. Many of the Simon Coleman drawings held in the National Folklore Collection, UCD and the sketches in the manuscript collection by folklore collectors on fieldwork also feature. In her 1993 publication *Kinmonth* included some paintings among the 320 images, but there were 250 published paintings in her 2006 publication *Irish Rural Interiors in Art*, with references to many more. Her study of international artists such as Howard Helmick and his many depictions of the Sligo/Tuam chair adds a great deal to the research of this particular three-legged chair from the west of Ireland. This current publication uses many images or references to paintings by Jack B. Yeats, Aloysius O Kelly, James Brennan and Erskine Nicol. Irish postcard artists like John Carey and many unnamed works are also featured.

Kinmonth is passionate about the subject of traditional furniture and furnishings. She imparts her vast knowledge in such a personable way that it is accessible for every type of reader and certainly not just the specialist. Kinmonth writes like she speaks and as though she is chatting to the reader. Often when reading this work I felt that it was like an audio book and I was listening to her give an eloquently-toned lecture. With this manner, she deals with poverty and scarcity: “It may seem bizarre to open a chapter discussing beds with descriptions of people who did not have them” (p.294), and later, “Just as the chapter on beds opens with an apparent lack of them, the study of tables starts with arrangements of small objects, instead of individual purpose built objects” (p.367). The same narrative style is executed with her use of brackets, those of the grammatical kind, as a way of supplementing the information: “On top of the cords and the rush or straw mattress (or palliasse) was either a tick or bed (another type of mattress) filled with loose straw (often misleadingly called chaff) flock, goose feathers or (in Co. Wicklow) white bog cotton (in Irish *ceannbhán*), according to one’s means” (p.310).

I am so fortunate to work with such a fine collection of traditional furniture and furnishings in the Irish Folklife Collection. This has allowed me, just as it allowed this author, to see the extraordinary in ordinary everyday objects. Yet Kinmonth understands that there was a hardship to living in a traditional house without water or electricity. This is why so many of the houses she visited in the late 1980s were allowed to fall to ruin as their inhabitants embraced modernity. Thankfully, we have Kinmonth’s research to record what was lost. This book enhances our appreciation of our Irish cultural heritage, and the resourcefulness and creativity of the people who made and used Irish country furniture and furnishings.

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