

Revolution in the Farmhouse Kitchen: Modernisation and the Irish Noggin, a Wooden Vessel for Food and Drink

Claudia Kinmonth

Working on revision of the book 'Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950' (Yale University Press, 1993), which touched on small furniture and furnishings, brought the author back to spotlight the subject of Irish noggins. These were widely used complex wooden drinking and eating vessels. Once ubiquitous, they were used in almost every section of Irish society: from the kitchens of the so called big houses (where they are listed in the early 18th), to prisons (which advertised for makers to provide them along with lists of other essential provisions), public houses (where they were sufficiently robust not to break), workhouses, which numbered them for each inmate and orphanages, which sent children abroad with noggins to the 'new world'. Most commonly perhaps, the widely produced noggin was familiar in use and on display in Irish farmhouses and cabins. There a 'row of snow white noggins' was something to be proud of on the dresser, cherished, admired and described by foreign visitors.

The noggin has a long lineage, which research into archaeological evidence shows goes back to equivalent objects used in the Viking period in Ireland. Their subsequent use, and the actual word coming from the English word Noggin along with plantations in Tudor times, was closely associated with milk products and remained commonly associated with butter making regions right up to the beginning of the 20th century. This new research is interdisciplinary, so as a furniture historian and art historian, with a practical background in restorers' workshops, as well as experience working in the Victoria and Albert Museum, I explore the vessel from every potentially informative angle. Through travellers' descriptions and in art, it appears as the centrepiece of the Irish meal, placed in a round basket of boiled potatoes, often containing buttermilk. Each member of the family dipped their potato into the noggin of buttermilk, as 'kitchen', and the paper will show early examples of this in watercolours and engravings, as well as the custom's survival into the early 20th, century when the noggin is beginning to be replaced by ceramic alternatives. Folklore narratives up to the 1940s describe the noggin being used like this, and its decline as changes in dairying, and mechanisation via the creameries, put the noggin makers out of business. The noggin is symbolic of communal eating, of farming families who practised their own butter-making at home, and used noggins for the by product, buttermilk, or for eating stirabout (porridge) from.

Research into the construction of a woven oak and ash noggin using the latest XRadia techniques, reveals how highly complex the secret construction of the woven noggin was. It involved a deliberately hidden technique, like making a small conical oak barrel, but hooping it with a single ash band, with ash veneer held by interlocking ledged fingers. The



© 2016 Claudia Kinmonth. All rights reserved.

noggin-weaver specialised in noggins and made nothing else. It emerges as the most complex and skilled element of Irish woodwork, as it was made to be watertight, yet lacked glue or metal. The noggin was such a widespread and commonly used vessel, that many sayings and proverbs arose from the way it was used and how long it took to make it well.

Its decline during the first couple of decades of the twentieth century was for a variety of reasons. Modernisation of the dairy industry, via the creamery system and the inability of the coopers, turners and noggin weavers to compete commercially with cheaper tin and ceramic vessels, saw their decline. The playwright John Millington Synge wrote of its use in the Aran Islands at the dawn of the 20th century, where he observed how people still drank out of 'tiny barrels'. Yet by around 1916, as a food vessel, it had become outmoded and overtaken by modernisation, so subsequently it was recalled nostalgically.

This paper presents an interdisciplinary view of this iconic object, combining imagery and text. Since part of this research involved having reproductions of noggins made by a master cooper, the audience will be able to examine and handle actual examples. The full length illustrated article on the Irish noggin will be published in the forthcoming journal of The Irish Georgian Society, Irish Architectural & Decorative Studies, this summer, 2016.